

International youth exchanges  
for social inclusion

opening  
doors...



## Is Europe for all?

More than 50 years after the Treaty of Rome, despite the goodwill of the signatories, Europe looks often far from being perceived as an opportunity for its citizens: in particular, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to perceive Europe and European Institutions as “another wheel” of bureaucracy: “Eurobureaucracy” more than “European Democracy”.

Conversely, Europe can be a source and tool for integration, inclusion and citizenship. This is the background on which the project “Use your hands to improve your competencies and potentialities” was developed, with the aim to promote environmental volunteering and awareness as a powerful means to develop a sense of belonging to local and European communities, a feeling of ownership and therefore a commitment toward society. The specific participang group was made up of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, led by experienced youth workers or

refers to people who have less access than others to education, culture, paid work and politics, because of their socio-economic backgrounds. The word ‘*disadvantaged*’ is often linked to “social exclusion”. In many countries, young people are excluded from mainstream society due to bad economical conditions, but a wider perspective can show that “young people with fewer opportunities” are all those that face some obstacles compared to their peers, because of social problems, discrimination, economic situation, disability, low qualifications or school results, different cultural background, health issues or geographical disadvantage, religious backgrounds or behaviour, etc.

volunteers. The actual running of the project has shown the difficulties in involving young people and how long the path is towards full “social inclusion”: some of the hints for future projects reported in this publication are the result of the evaluation made by the participants, the leaders and all the persons involved in the projects and are exactly addressed in particular to improve the impact on both individuals and organizations. Behind the word “disadvantaged” lies the assumption that most people have the potential for self-development, for successfully following an education and active participation in society, but this potential often stays hidden because of circumstances outside of them. Usually the word



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Summer 2009 saw the implementation of the project “Use your hands to improve your competencies and potentialities”, an international youth exchange promoted by a group of European non-profit organizations in the frame of the *Youth in Action* programme of the European Union. The projects took place in Gela, in the southern part of Sicily, during 11 days and involved twenty youngsters and five leaders coming from Italy, Spain, Iceland and Poland. Some of them experienced their first-ever exchange and even the first travel abroad.

Different activities run inside the natural reserve “Biviere di Gela” in co-operation with the managing body of the reserve, turned into a non formal education process and a social inclusion activity by means of socialization and integration among peers and with the staff of the Reserve. The participation in the project for most of young people involved has been part of a “personal pathway” toward self-esteem and social rehabilitation, due to the underprivileged backgrounds they came from.

This publication is the result of the feedbacks from the participants and the sending organizations, with the vision to provide hints for future similar activities, taking advantage from the experience made in Italy.

Of course a big “thank you” is to be addressed to all the participants and leaders who offered their time, energy and enthusiasm.



Education and Culture

‘Youth in Action’ Programme



## International activities for social inclusion. Is it possible?

Taking part in international activities is often perceived as an activity “for rich people”, for those who have enough free time. The experience run in different contexts has shown that taking part in international youth exchanges, and in particular in those where some kind of manual activities are foreseen, is for the benefit of the participants themselves. It is an essential element in active citizenship because participants take part in small services to the community and play an active role in society. They develop a sense of belonging to a community thereby also gaining ownership.

International activities and

ties” can benefit from the experience of visiting foreign countries and living in an international group. It broadens their horizons and gives them a new perspective on their own situation, as well as a sense of pride for having done something very challenging.

Voluntary activities are an important element: they are a tool through which young people from different backgrounds can put aside their differences and work towards a common goal. The practical nature of some of this work means the young people can overcome language and cultural difficulties to work together as a team. The sense of achievement they may get from completing a project is crucial to their personal self-esteem. They also learn practical skills

### Why involve international groups?

We think young people “with fewer opportunities



and competencies through the work on both a personal and professional or social level. Most importantly, taking part in such activities gives young people who are often on the margins of society, the opportunity to be part of a small community, and to realise they can make a positive contribution to this community.

Of course, this is not “education” in the traditional formal sense, but is connected to the living environment a youngster is involved in during the time of the exchange; in our cases, during the time of the voluntary projects: cultural stereotypes, personal behaviours, national or religious or ethnic conflicts... all of them have shown to be present at the very beginning of each project, many have been shown to have disappeared after some days of house sharing, of common work for a specific, tangible goal.



### Working with young people not for young people

When organizing inclusion activities, there is a danger you will organise things *for* young people, not *with* them. We think it is important to get everyone involved in organising things as much as possible. Allowing the young people to take ownership of a project, through shared decision-making processes for example, will increase the desire to participate actively, and also allow them to develop key competencies and skills: in the end participating in such activities is an empowering tool. Another important factor

## Individual projects VS group projects. How to implement a youth exchange focusing on volunteering

The actual implementation of our project has highlighted the difficulty in involving individual young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in international activities. Several obstacles of different kind (mainly psychological, but also connected to the need to break cultural barriers or even sometimes the need to overcome the resistance from the families) make it difficult for youngsters to accept the idea of taking part in



such "strange and challenging" experiences.

All the partners of the project agreed in adopting future projects to be run together or in co-operation with other organizations, the following checklist to favourite the safe participation to youth exchanges as first step toward a self-confidence building for youngsters and exploring further possibilities (such as EVS short term) as tools for inclusion of disadvantaged youth.

## Checklist for hosting a Youth Exchange

### Recruitment of Leaders and Coordinators and their preparation

Both the leaders and the coordinators have a full understanding of their responsibilities during a Youth Exchange. They understand that an exchange is not just a different kind of vacation or holiday and, on the other hand, are aware of the fact that doing volunteer activities during a youth exchange does not make it a workcamp. New lead-

ers and coordinators have been screened. In some countries this may include a Police check (Ireland), in others it simply means thoroughly checking references from past job .Leaders have attended suitable leader training where possible.

### Recruitment of Participants

The sending organization has established a good partnership at local level social actors (associations,

social services, juvenile crime prevention institutions, schools, etc). Participants have been recruited as early as possible and given the opportunity to take part in preparation activities and been given appropriate information about Youth in Action, with a special focus on actions 1.1 and 3.1. Families have been involved in the information activities.

Communication has been made between partner

organizations about difficulties or challenges facing the participants, which could affect their performance arising during the exchange, and this information will be treated as strictly confidential.

### Accommodation

All details and information regarding standards of accommodation have been communicated promptly and accurately to partner organizations.

Accommodation is suitable to geographical and weather conditions. There is a common room or space that can host group activities.

Accessibility of the venue has been checked for safety reasons e.g. can an ambulance get into the venue in the case of emergency? The venue has been visited during the Advanced Planning Visit.

### Food

Food Safety regulations will be adhered to, e.g. storage and preparation of food. A basic list of guidelines regarding food safety has been displayed in the cook areas. Special need of participants (e.g. allergies or religious diets) have

been communicated to the hosting organization.

### Emergency Procedures

All the participants have their own insurance or a general insurance contract for the exchange has been made by the hosting organization.

The coordinator of the exchange has provided the leaders of the exchange with all the relevant emergency information.

In cases where the participants will take part in water sports or other outdoor activities requiring specific competencies, a suitable person is present to ensure

the respect of safety procedures or provide first aid. A first aid kit is available at all times, and a person who can carry out First Aid is available.

### Documentation

The following documents should be used to facilitate communication between partners:

- an Application Form with personal and contact

details of the participants must be completed and sent to the hosting organization before the exchange;

- an Info Sheet will be compiled by the hosting organization and sent to all partners at least one month in advance of the exchange.

The Info Sheet is a document which contains all the practical information related to the exchange: how to get there, what to bring, general information about the region and local language, etc.

- an Evaluation sheet should be completed by leaders and sent to the hosting organization.







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