

opening  
doors;

international youth exchanges  
for social inclusion

# 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:

“*European Democracy*” more than “*Eurobureaucracy*”.

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 participating 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 qualification, or school results, different cultural background, health issues or geographical disadvantage, religious backgrounds or behaviour, sexual orientation, etc.



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tion contained therein.

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.

## 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

### Why involve international groups?

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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.

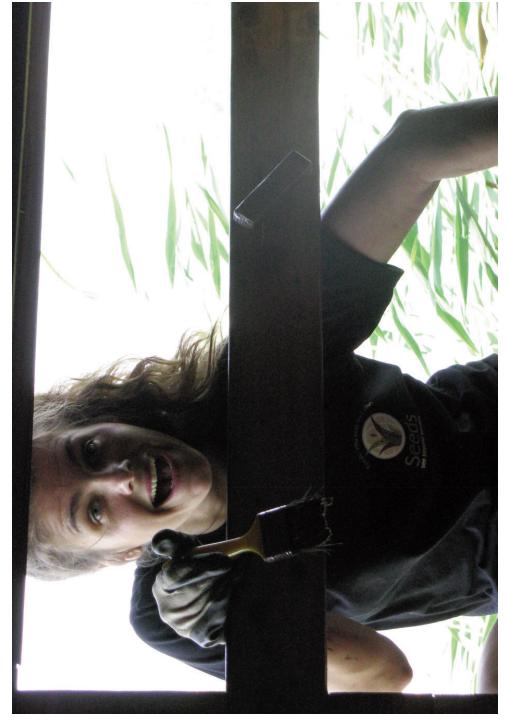
The practical nature of this work means the young people can overcome language and cultural difficulties to work together as a team. The sense of achievement they may get from completing a project is crucial to their personal self esteem.

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is that participation of young people will depend on how well they know you and trust you. People may not apply for an international or national voluntary activity if there is a lack of information, a lack In the end it is evident that 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







Italian Ministry of Justice  
YOUTH JUSTICE  
JUVENILE JUSTICE CENTRE - SICILY

