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Volunteering as a Tool for Roma Youth Participation

**A Guide for Recruiting, Supporting Young Roma Volunteers, and
Maintaining Active Engagement**

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Overview of Study Session

In order to improve the Network's practices and develop new tools, in cooperation with the Youth Department of the Council of Europe, Young Adults in Global Mission - Central Europe program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and the Federation of Roma Associations in Catalonia (FAGIC), Phiren Amenca International Network organized a Study Session on Volunteering as a Tool for Roma Participation in the European Youth Center, in Budapest between September 30 and October 4, 2019. Twenty-two young people (age 18-30) from 10 different countries participated in the study session. All of them were current and former, local and international volunteers, mentors, coordinators, tutors, and youth workers of Phiren Amenca member and partner organizations. The selected participants were motivated to develop their competencies in voluntary service and youth work and to share their experiences with other participants.

The aim of the Study Session was to improve the practices of youth voluntary service organizations regarding the recruitment, preparation, support, and continued involvement of their Roma and non-Roma volunteers. By doing so, the session was able to help to develop their long-term involvement in youth work and civil society activism to combat stereotypes, racism, and antigypsyism.

During the study session we provided space for exchanging, explaining, and analyzing existing tools and practices to involve and/or recruit more young Roma in local activities and international volunteering, and also to increase the quality of these programs. We aimed to provide knowledge and develop the attitudes and skills related to human rights, intercultural dialogue, and antigypsyism of actors in the field of youth work and voluntary service. The trainers of the study session focused on improving further existing tools and develop new ones in order to ensure a better quality of voluntary service programs aimed at young Roma volunteers and non-Roma volunteers serving in Roma communities. Thanks to the brainstorming with the participants, innovative strategies have been explored for keeping former volunteers involved in promoting human rights and acting against antigypsyism after their service.

This guide contains the results of the session and was finalized during a networking meeting "Enhancing Roma Youth Participation in Europe", which was held between 20-22 November, 2019 in Florence, Italy: it clarifies the roles and responsibilities of different actors involved in voluntary service programs. It takes stock of the challenges which might arise in different stages of a volunteering project and offers some methods and practices of the recruitment of young people facing difficulties into volunteering and supporting them during and after their service. All the methods were collected by the participants of the study session and the meeting and reflect the experiences of volunteers, mentors, and youth workers.



Access to Volunteering Projects and its Benefits

Volunteering equips people of all different backgrounds with skills and competencies which position them better in the labor market through developing their intercultural awareness and critical thinking skills. In addition to this, volunteers can come to understand and celebrate the diversity of humankind. A common model of volunteerism includes bringing together individuals from different backgrounds to spark curiosity, enable cross-cultural cooperation and dialogue, and create community. Voluntary service programs can be short-term or long-term and either local, national, or international. Volunteers can get the opportunity to live in and support communities, spending time with hosting organizations that are active in a variety of social fields such as youth work, sports, social inclusion, environment, human rights, arts, culture, and so much more. By engaging in local activities, volunteers gain unforgettable life experiences, enhance social and intercultural skills, benefit from non-formal educational activities, and possibly learn new languages.

Young people with fewer opportunities (disabled people, those facing health problems, educational difficulties, economic, social or geographical obstacles and/or cultural differences, as defined by the European Commission) have limited access to support services, international programs in general, and volunteering projects in particular. Because they are either difficult to reach or their mobility is hindered, special attention is given to their involvement in international activities. Many young Roma often fall into more of the sub-categories which are often mutually constitutive (eg. because of belonging to a group culturally different than the surrounding majority, they are often segregated and live in remote areas, their parents suffer discrimination when looking for jobs, and therefore face economic difficulties).

This hinders their access to programs and experiences which would better position them on the labor market and support their upward social mobility.

The voluntary service program of the Phiren Amenca International Network is built on its mission to challenge stereotypes, racism, and antigypsyism. To reach that goal, we aim to involve more and more young Roma in short- and long-term European mobility programs, such as Erasmus Plus, civil service, and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). Many volunteers remain active in the fight against discrimination and antigypsyism after their service concludes. Together with our member and partner organizations, we invest time and capacities to provide them with opportunities to remain active and engaged in our mission as leaders, trainers, educators and members of our project teams.

We believe in a step-by-step approach to the empowerment of Roma youth for full participation in social and political life. This approach starts with local volunteering through short term international mobilities and moves to long-term volunteering and organizing activities themselves. Young people, with adequate support from youth and voluntary service organizations can become role models and youth leaders in their communities. In order to secure this path, adequate support mechanisms and well-prepared supporters are needed.

Organizers

- **Phiren Amenca** is an international network of Roma and non-Roma volunteers and voluntary service organizations creating opportunities for non- formal education, dialogue and engagement, in order to challenge stereotypes and racism
- **FAGiC (Federation of Roma Associations in Catalonia)** gathers 96 Roma associations from all over Catalonia. FAGiC is the most representative Roma organization in the region, who's purpose is to defend and promote the rights and culture of the Roma people in Catalonia
- **ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission** program invites young adults from the US ages 21-29 into a transformative, year-long journey in international service
- **Council of Europe Youth Department** provides funding and educational support for international youth activities aiming to promote youth citizenship, youth mobility and the values of human rights, democracy and cultural pluralism



ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

There are several actors involved in the life and the project of a volunteer. Some of them are authorities and some have more informal roles. Here, we collected the main roles and responsibilities of volunteers, supporting (sending) organizations, hosting organizations, and mentors and the major challenges they face.

Volunteer

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Find and apply for opportunities
- Get informed about opportunities or organizations
- Register themselves to the PASS of the European Solidarity Corps
- Gather all information possible before the service and ask questions
- Perform necessary administrative tasks (eg. related to health insurance)
- Be patient (including with themselves)
- Be open and tolerant
- Communicate if problems arise
- Be responsible and on time
- Respect team, community, and beneficiaries
- Be an active member of the team and/or community
- Be flexible with time and energy
- Be conscious about their learning process
- Be proactive and non-judgmental
- Take efforts to adapt to local environment
- Be ready to leave their comfort zone
- Share experiences

Challenges:

- Loneliness
- Adaptation to new environment, culture, and expectations
- Language barrier and frustration that comes with it
- Separating personal attitudes/home life from work
- Culture shock
- Being independent and autonomous
- Living together with people from different cultures and backgrounds
- Difficulty budgeting allowances



Supporting/Sending Organization

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Recruiting volunteers
- Selection of the volunteers
- Preparing volunteers before departure
- Supporting volunteer while abroad
- Communicating with volunteers and host organizations
- Solve problems as they arise and when needed
- Maintain healthy relationships with partners
- Dissemination of results of project
- Reintegration of volunteer upon return

Challenges:

- Keeping volunteers motivated before, during, and after project
- Management of project (financial, logistic, administrative, etc.)
- Finding a good fit between the volunteer and a project
- Availability to solve problems
- Managing conflicts between volunteer and host organization



Hosting Organization/Supervisor

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Provide volunteer with information about project
- Define expectations and role of volunteer in the project and community before arrival
- Monitor volunteer's progress
- Select mentors and keeping frequent communication
- Provide ongoing direction for volunteer
- Evaluate and summarize outcome of the project

Challenges:

- Meeting the expectations and interests of the volunteers
 - Keeping all the people involved in the project engaged
 - Time management
 - Financial management
-

Mentor

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Cultural mediation, when appropriate/needed
- Counseling and guidance for the volunteer
- Motivate the volunteer throughout the project
- Cultivate relationships
- Help keep volunteers safe
- Follow and support learning process of volunteer
- Manage conflict between volunteers and hosting organizations

Challenges:

- Responding to issues in a timely manner
- Being available and flexible
- Keeping up with the volunteer and how they are doing
- Maintaining relationships



RECRUITMENT

As an organization, recruitment is one of the first major actions made in the realm of volunteerism. Recruiting includes any number of actions or events made in order to gain interest or participation in volunteering within the organization.

Reaching out to young people with fewer opportunities and especially to Roma youth is especially important and challenging at the same time, because they have less opportunities to learn languages, less access to information and services, and a generally weaker advocacy capacity. As Roma are the biggest minority in Europe in numbers, but also one of the most discriminated ones, specific attention should be placed on enabling them to participate in international mobility activities. In a globalizing world and in an intercultural Europe, Roma youth as well as young people with fewer opportunities should have the chance to gain intercultural skills, foreign language knowledge, and international practice in diverse work environments so that their chances on the labor market increase. It would also be necessary for these young people to get reinforced support for enhancing their skills, knowledge and competences in active citizenship as they are less likely to have a chance to advocate for their and their communities' needs.

Challenges:

- Time consuming
- Motivating future volunteers
- Preparing volunteers to leave their families
- Recruitment to on-boarding success is not guaranteed
- Filling in application forms and writing motivation letters
- Might require extra support
- Some have limited resources
- Language barrier
- Families might oppose
- Reaching youth with fewer opportunities



Recruitment Methods

Here is a list of methods suggested and developed by the participants of the session:

- Open Calls - Promoted as a way for volunteers to apply on their own via online application, in person, etc. Organization posts online that they are accepting applications. Volunteers follow a link to the application at their own will.
- Social Media - Utilizing different social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) to promote volunteering and the organization to create an interest in applying to be a volunteer. Posting on Facebook about opportunities or needs within the organization and following up with questions and interactions regularly. Attaching a link to the post can inspire youth to apply while they are interested by the social media posts.
- Recruiting Platform - Some countries have their own centralized online tools to advertise opportunities, but the Placement and Administrative Support System of the European Solidarity Corps is also an adequate tool to contact people who are interested in volunteering projects (https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity/pass_en). Some pages and groups on Facebook also function as advertising boards for volunteering projects.
- Word of Mouth - This is said to be the most successful method. Talking to people in formal or informal settings about opportunities within the organization and utilizing connections between people to share a message. This can happen spontaneously, but take several organized forms, such as promotion events and school visits.

- Promotion Events - Fairs and festivals can be organized to promote volunteering and introduce organizations and opportunities. These can also be in conjunction with universities or schools. A fair can be organized to talk about the importance of volunteering and how youth can get involved with different organizations.
- Visiting Schools - Organization contacts schools within target audience's community to be able to present opportunities for volunteering and incite inspiration. Find a high school or a college where there are Roma students and ask to make a presentation. Former volunteers can be part of the presentation and those that are interested in being a volunteer can apply on the spot.
- Community Work - Building volunteers from the community. Integration of the target group and working with the grassroots. Example:

Sulukule community center in Turkey was established in a Roma neighborhood in 2006. It was a safe place for the children of the neighborhood to come and express themselves and participate in the non-formal education activities. The children have grown up now, and they are active participants of Roma rights movement in Turkey.

- Networking - Local organizations working with other organizations to create a network of people. This can introduce an exchange of support within the realms of volunteering. An NGO was looking for a volunteer and was struggling to find it. They spread the word through all the partners all over Europe they had and they were able to find it.

- Treasure Hunt - A game that promotes volunteering in very unique ways, depending on the need. Example:

At a university in Romania, volunteer program coordinators placed little messages under the doors of dormitory rooms with questions, such as "Do you have something to say but nobody is listening?" and fun tasks. For example, they were invited to go to a place to prepare some type of speech about their field of interest, then they got other assignments. As the students became invested already in the fun activity, at the last station they were offered volunteering opportunities. This can be part of the application and selection process.

- Involving Former Volunteers - Former volunteers can share their volunteering experiences to attract others and be a model for future volunteers. They can go to school visits and organize promotion events with the organization. Promoting the volunteering experience with the help of former volunteers is more personal and interested young people can also ask them about so they can talk about what it is like.



SUPPORTING A VOLUNTEER

Throughout the time of service of a volunteer, support should be offered to ensure success in their settings. Supporting a volunteer can take form in many different ways whether short-term, long-term, local, or international. This support can require preparation beforehand, but is a crucial piece in volunteerism.

Methods of supporting a volunteer can look like creating a handbook ahead of time, offering an orientation event, support in learning languages, site visits throughout the year, regular communication, reintegration procedures, and much more. Supporting a volunteer can involve a few challenges, though, including a language barrier that has to be overcome, searching for effective ways to communicate, being available to respond to crises that arise, and overall preparation of the volunteer for their time of service.

Challenges:

- Language barrier/teaching a new language
 - Preparing the volunteer for service
 - Finding ways to communicate throughout service
 - Availability to respond to crisis
-

Support Methods

Here is a list of methods suggested and developed by the participants of the session:

iPrepare online tool - a tool for pre-departure preparation of volunteers leaving for long-term international service, developed by Egyesek Youth Association. This online tool offers interactive modules covering topics such as intercultural learning, motivations/expectations, conflict management, and more. This tool is intended to be used supplementary to off-line preparation of volunteers. It can also be useful in assessing the interests, skills and competences of the applicants in order to find the best placements of them. Find it at: iprepare.eu

- Orientation - An orientation can occur at any point towards the beginning of the volunteers' time of service after arrival and can provide information on the community, the organization, and overall prepare the volunteer for service. Before beginning work, the volunteers gather for an orientation to adapt to new contexts, begin learning language, and prepare themselves to start work.
- Creating a Handbook - Creating a Handbook with information for the volunteer regarding rights & responsibilities, local context, useful information, and much more can help guide the volunteer throughout their time of service. A handbook includes a section with information on how to set up a bank account in their area and the volunteer can refer to this information when the time comes. It can also list other local organizations hosting international volunteers, places for language exchange activities, tips from former volunteers, etc.
- Regular communication - between volunteer, supporting organization, and hosting organization is extremely important in case of volunteers with fewer opportunities. It is crucial that they feel safe and supported by their home organization.
- Reflection/debriefing sessions - Young people with fewer opportunities and Roma volunteers might need more regular meeting with their supervisors, especially in the beginning of their service. Setting time aside for weekly meetings is necessary in all volunteering projects, but special attention should be given to it when hosting Roma volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Host family living situations (when applicable) - Finding a local family that would like to have a volunteer live with them during the time of service. Having a volunteer live with a local family can improve language learning and the feeling of belonging.

- Language Learning - This can occur before and/or during the volunteer's time of service to help them communicate in their communities. Volunteer meets weekly with a language tutor to sharpen skills of the language. In case of young people who had limited access to language learning opportunities, extra linguistic support should be provided, using the budget's organizational support line. This ideally starts already before they start their service, so they feel less vulnerable.
- Occasional Site Visits - Visiting the site of the volunteer to check in on the progress and fit between the volunteer and the hosting organization/community. Visiting the site occasionally ensures success between the volunteer and hosting organization and can help solve any issues that arise between the two.
- Reinforced Mentoring - Extra support provided to the volunteers by a local young person who themselves have volunteering experience, are familiar with the social context of the placement, but can also support the volunteer in setting, tracking, and evaluating their learning goals. Reinforced mentoring can entail more meetings with the with the mentor, or assigning more mentors to one volunteers: one responsible for the personal well-being and the sense of comfort of the volunteer and the other following and monitoring the learning process.

Crisis and conflict management - Setting a way to manage crises and issues as they arise in a timely and efficient manner. As an issue with the volunteer comes up, finding who needs to be contacted to handle this situation in the best way possible. There are different ways both organizations and young people can approach conflicts and tools they can use. The handbook of the Polish STRIM organisation contains educational materials about conflict resolution education for teenagers and young adults:

http://firstadrkit.org/pdf/Handbook_firstADRkit_.pdf



AFTER SERVICE

After the time of service, volunteers can be involved in a vast array of activities or projects either within the organization or with a partnering organization. Keeping past volunteers involved can be essential to the growth of both the organization and the volunteer themselves.

Involvement can take shape as a mentoring program between past volunteers and current volunteers, helping with recruitment, sharing their stories with their local communities, becoming a team member, and much more. Engaging previous volunteers can look different for each volunteer as well as each organization, so implementation of various methods should be discussed thoroughly between the volunteer and the organization to find the perfect fit. Challenges can include, but are not limited to, keeping former volunteers motivated and engaged, losing contact, lack of time from the former volunteer, or lack of resources (financially or other) from either party. If the volunteer has a sour experience within their time of service, a loss of interest and/or trust might have occurred and will pose as a challenge for the organization willing to engage in further activities or projects.

Challenges:

- Keeping the former volunteers motivated and engaged
- Reinforcing the trust in the volunteer
- Lack of resources/money
- Losing contact with the volunteers
- Loss of interest from the volunteer
- Lack of time with the volunteer
- Reintegration support



After Service Engagement Methods

Here is a list of methods suggested and developed by the participants of the session:

- Reintegration Program/Support - Offering a program or support to the volunteer at the close of their time of service to help them prepare to enter back into their home communities to combat reverse culture shock. Holding a week-long program either at the end of the time of service or upon return home to debrief experiences and learn how to take new knowledge back home.
- Former volunteers sharing their own experiences with current volunteers - Returnees can be involved in the promotion/recruitment events, can hold a presentation and discussion at pre-departure seminars, or be in touch with the volunteers during their service in order to help them cope with daily struggles.
- Connection with other organizations in their environment - Creating connections between organizations can help the volunteer find new opportunities within their local context. For example, when former volunteer does not have an opportunity to work for sending organization but they can be connected with a similar organization.
- Occasional meetings or activities - Sending/supporting organization involves former volunteers when organizing local events to help them in logistics, administration, hosting the event, or acting as facilitators.
- Helping with recruitment - Former volunteers can spread the word in their daily lives, but can also join the supporting organization in promotion events. They can create social media content about their experiences and learnings in order to encourage young people for volunteering.

Mentoring - Mentoring a current volunteer can include sharing skills learned during service and how to better navigate challenges. Short-term (presentations, meetings, etc.) or a longer-term volunteer mentoring. Current volunteers can be paired with a mentor to talk through experiences. They can also support the learning process of the current volunteers by utilizing their own experiences. Although mentoring is not a formal profession, it requires particular skills and competences. Some National Agencies organize training courses for volunteer mentors, but voluntary service organizations can also set up such practices. Although in most settings there is no specific budget allocated for mentoring, volunteer mentors can be compensated with in-kind contributions.

- Support other organizations in building voluntary service projects - When former volunteers are in contact with civil society organizations in their proximity, they can explain the benefits of setting up voluntary service programs and can even support the process administratively as well as in terms of infrastructure and content.
- Employment within an organization - Employment opportunities for former volunteers with good professional skills (academic, organizing, activities, etc.) Former volunteer joins organization in a professional capacity, as a staff member.

Active involvement in activities or events - Inviting volunteers to festivals, seminars, and activities and offering leadership opportunities when available. Former volunteer is recruited to help lead sessions within seminar and can provide unique experiences and expertise. Former volunteers can be actively involved in the lives of the organizations first by supporting events in smaller tasks, but later can be contracted as facilitators or even trainers. While assisting team members, they themselves can acquire the necessary skills. This contributes not only to the work of the organization, but to the employability of former volunteers by providing opportunities of professional practice.

References

Information on Organizers

- **Phiren Amenca International Network:**
 - <http://www.phirenamenca.eu/>
- **FAGiC:**
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- **ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission:**
 - <https://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Global-Mission/Young-Adults-in-Global-Mission>
- **Council of Europe Youth Department:**
 - <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/about-us>
 - <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth-roma/coe-and-roma-youth>

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