Research Report

U.S.B

United Societies of Balkans

Thessaloniki, Greece

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In the following pages, we present the research that was conducted by the youth NGO United Societies of Balkans, in Greece, in the frame of the project "Civic Help for Anti-Racist Measures in youth work (CHARM)", contract number JUST/2012/FRAC/AC/2723, supported by the Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme of the European Union. It aimed at identifying the attitudes and tendencies in youth organizations working in various spheres towards anti-racism, human rights and related themes and especially how they relate those themes to their own sphere of work.

Research group

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methodology

Our research targeted at the 54 youth organizations that according to the statistics of the Greek National Agency are active in the EVS programme. USB, correctly indicated these organizations as the ideal target group due to their potential to host and send volunteers from and to other countries; because of that they are a preferential for delivering the ideas of CHARM II, both to their volunteers and , through them, to the respective societies.

For the needs of the project, the research comprised of three parts: a) *online survey*; b) *focus group*; c) *personal interviews*.

a) Online survey

It consisted of five-part questionnaire addressing both general information about the participants and their organization, and specific issues in regard with the CHARM II interests: a. Personal information; b. Profile of the organization; c. Personal experience; d. Personal opinion; e. Future plans. With the 10th of May being the last day and the 23rd of March the first, the survey was completed by only 35 organizations from the 54 that had received it.

b) Focus group

It took place on the 13th of April, in Thessaloniki, with 20 participants from 18 organizations active in EVS in Greece. All of them had already replied to the online survey and were informed about the CHARM II programme. Apart from a common interest in EVS, organizations were active in a variety of thematic subjects – from ecology to students' issues – and all had a different standpoint in describing their experience with human rights and anti-racism matters.

c) Personal interviews

By the end of the focus group we conducted personal vis-a-vis interviews with 3 participants from the most experienced – in terms of years – organizations present. In the next two weeks we conducted two additional personal – through *Skype* – interviews, with other participants of the focus group and one more vis-à-vis with an organization that had replied to the survey but did not make it to the focus group due to a last minute problem.

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The difficulties we had were related with a general distrust between the youth organizations in Greece and their lack of determination or motivation to collaborate. The short number of replies on the survey and the small number of attendants of the focus group was challenged by the resourceful and genuine involvement of the participants of the research.

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summary of findings

a) Situation with diversity within the organizations

The very first issue brought up by the research was the issue of unintentional under-representation of some social groups. These groups included all the possible categories of people in difficulty, for each society in which our participants are active; immigrants, disabled people, financially poor people, people aged less than 22 and more than 30, were the main categories referred in the online survey, the focus group and the personal interviews.

Nevertheless, the reasoning of this under-representation seems not to reside in intrinsic stereotypes and attitudes; it is mostly associated with the lack of interaction with social groups that have not been – or will not be – profitable to them in any direct or indirect way. In other words, organizations have the will to include all possible social groups, but it is not in their priorities, and, consequently, it is up to individuals or groups interested to contact a youth organization for possible co-operation.

Age and nationality of the participants on the online survey showed that 30 from the 35 were Greeks (two of the five foreigners participated in the focus group as well) and only 5 out of 35 aged between 18 and 25; the reason may be that Greek and over 25 means possibly experienced in the job. This negligence was documented very well in the answers of the question *"We would like to invite, in our activities, people with different cultural background..."*: 6 respondents acknowledged the existence of difficulties; the language barrier; fear of creating and reproducing stereotypes and prejudices; lack of means and personnel. On the other hand, 32 of the respondents agreed in the choice *"if they wanted to join us"*. This response, connected with the expressed opinion that "*we can't change the purpose of our existence* (i.e. ecology or people with disabilities) *just to include excluded groups"*, shows that most organizations are very strictly stacked with their declared interests and have no interest to endorse a more inclusive programme.

b) Racism and Human Rights

In the last volume of the *Journal of Social Inclusion,* Fiona Kumari Campbell (2012:1) stated that *"tolerance is seen as a gesture towards inclusion, something that the so called majority 'put up with', within certain limits towards people different from themselves".* The difficulty in defining Racism and Human Rights was obvious in all the parts of the research. Consequently the understanding of these terms is scarce, and in many cases participants expressed contradictory opinions. For example, in the online research, many participants agreed with the phrase: "*We organize our projects in respect with the Human Rights values*", and disagreed with the phrase: "*Respect for human rights is a prerequisite for the functioning of our organization*". Nonetheless, all organizations denunciate all kinds of racist attitude and practice.

There are doubts about the effectiveness of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and therefore, the majority of the participants kept an ambiguous attitude towards it, balancing between respect and vagueness. "*The respect of Human Rights is distinguishing democratic states from dictatorships*", and "*everybody is responsible for the respect of the Declaration, and consequently nobody really is*", are examples of the opinions expressed during the focus group. In the personal interviews, the participants were more open to say that in practice, in their daily work they catch themselves violating the human rights of their colleagues or of individuals who address in their daily activities with their organization.

The most stimulating conclusion is that youth organizations, despite condemning racist attitudes, they lack of educated personnel who can identify underlying racist manners (i.e. the premeditated exclusion of immigrants from activities that deal with issues of their communities).

c) **Examples of anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices**

Some of the organizations are acquainted with anti-racist groups, due to the fact that they are located in regions with high percentage of immigrants; it is not their priority, but they come face to face with it in their neighborhood, even if most of them are not active in the movement; only one participant – during the focus group – openly said that his organization is very active in the local movement.

Prevention and dialogue are the main words mentioned by the participants in focus group and in the interviews, as the key tools for facing racism and discrimination. "*We cannot offer a high-scale and high-standards education to the local communities, this is the job of the government, so we can try at least to prevent dangerous situations*", said a participant from an organization active in

ecology in north Greece. "*Society is a living organism and it may always contain some viruses*"; "*we don't need special education to deal with the respect of Human Rights*"; "*individually I will happily engage in anti-racism but I will not suggest it to my organization*", are only some of the phrases that were heard in focus group and interviews.

The lack of experience and practices opened the stage for a great discussion in the focus group, where all the participants problematized both the terms racism and discrimination, and their attitude toward the related social problems, with all the implicit or explicit stereotypes and prejudices that this attitude may imply.

d) Stereotypes

In the focus group, and, even more, in the personal interviews there appeared various stereotypes. First of all, there is a view of their own self as the one supposed to cover the empty spaces left by the central government. Inherent with this, appeared the strong stereotype of NGO sector as corrupted. The discussion around corruption showed in the most obvious way how a stereotypical view creates a hostile environment for the one subjected to it, especially if we talk about a precarious body or individual, like disabled, immigrants, poor people etc.

In order to bring up the discussion around stereotypes and prejudices I used a tool which demonstrates the intersection of stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination and self-fulfilling prophecies. Participants created their own scenarios of a story with starting point any of these four parts. It is not representative, but the center of attention was the Roma people and their unwillingness to integrate, and north-european volunteers in EVS and their strict discipline in work.

In the personal interviews, participants had more time to explain their opinion about specific groups. For an experienced youth organization from North Greece, "*Caucasus and African countries*" were considered "*dangerous, unsafe and non-trusted for partners, not for me personally, but for the safety of my volunteers*".

The participant from a small organization in Peloponnese, claimed that "*there is no intentional stereotyping, but mostly lack of knowledge, which added to a general fear for the unknown creates a fluent misunderstanding. However, experiences prove to be the best doctor for these misunderstandings*". Experience was not so productive for a public organization active in EVS: "*North Europeans have a incorrect view for what volunteering is. They strongly believe that volunteering means work and they cannot integrate in more educative and relaxed environments, but this is not something to change in a period of some months or*

even a year. It is a matter of cultural differences between north-european and Mediterranean people".

conclusions

The research showed a respect – from the part of the youth organizations – for the values that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stands for, and therefore for the need for anti-racist and anti-discrimination measures, especially now, when Greece is facing a crisis that encourages racist attitudes. Apart from this respect, all organizations are open to all cultural/social groups, regardless of background.

Still, the lack of motivation to include "*otherness*" is strikingly clear as the first obstacle. It wouldn't be unfair to claim that some Greek youth organizations suffer from institutionalization and the coherent with these problems: sustainability über alles; unjustified competitiveness with other organizations; lack of co-operation with other organizations. This institutionalization limits the sphere of their interest and their openness to other subjects to involve in their activities. However, as it was mentioned in the focus group by the majority of the participants, these organizations gradually close, due to the financial crisis and the decrease in sponsorships.

Despite these negative conclusions, a big part still is open to new features in both their work with and for others and in this group CHARM II shall put its main effort. They are eager to follow more inclusive paths in their job and they are interested in expanding the horizons of their activities for the sake of progress. They are committed in change and they believe that they can improve their society.

These organizations need the attention of people who can educate them in a broad way. It is not just lack of knowledge, as many participants suggested. It is lack of the ability to relate and identify the intersection between discriminative various practices and discriminations and between them and non-discriminative practices; lack of ability to recognize the existence of value in minor issues, such as silence, invisibility and vulnerability of some groups and individuals. Hence, there is no need for specific awareness about one group, but a broad awareness of what discrimination means to those who suffer it and to their society in general. The key to empower these organizations, after their education is to assist them in setting up effective anti-racist/inclusive practices, up to their specific needs.

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Very motivating in that direction will be a non-formal-education approach. The limits set by time and other deadlines is an aspect that has to be considered. Also, the central thematic interest of each organization cannot change. For that reason, education shall include application of the practices in their activities.

recommendations

Apart from everything else, research showed that the youth organizations are very busy with daily obligations and rarely pay attention to regular e-mails and Facebook notifications. The spreading of information around internet has created an invisible obstacle to communication, which is e-blindness; it became demanding to identify what is important and what is not through the innumerous e-mails and notifications and newsletters.

One solution may be the creation of a new flexible online network, possibly one in each country, in which all organizations will communicate their ideas, their problems and other issues. The idea was brought up by participants in the focus group, who liked the project and asked for the assistance of USB to improve their activities.

E-diary

In relation to this, we suggest a new online tool which may function as motivation for all organizations to engage not only with Human Rights and antiracism in theory but in practice as well. "E-diary" an online platform where all organizations shall post monthly a A4 page summary with an excluded person stating the problems s/he faces. Every next month all the other organizations shall propose two proposals for involving the interviewed person in their activities, and they will vote for the most creative and functional proposal. The first of each month will be rewarded with an e-coin. The group who will have gathered the most e-coins after every six months will be invited to present whichever proposal thinks better to all the CHARM II partners, and will be funded for applying it as a project.

The clean and flexible informational channel requires an equally clean and flexible content. The limits of time and the needs of the organizations seek for more non-formal methods, such as learn learning. If there is funding for biannual workshops, in which participants from all countries participating in CHARM II can present their learned practices and how they apply(ied) them in action.

Medicine Wheel and Carousel

During the focus group we applied a new game-method, inspired by aboriginal educational method of Medicine Wheel. The idea of this tool is that everything in life is connected and, therefore, nothing can be addressed isolated from the things related to it. Medicine wheel is a circle divided in four parts directed to the four cardinal points (N, E, S, W). Each of the four has a title and all titles are related in a way that is chosen by the trainer (i.e Stereotype, Prejudice, Discrimination, Self-fulfilling prophecy). Four participants take part in this game and they all sit at one of the four parts. One starts a story related to the title of the sector s/he is sitting at and the others follow up continuing the story moving on the title of their sector. In the end we have a full circle that directs back at the first stage and shows the interconnection of the selected subject, which in the example was stereotypes and prejudices.

The success of this tool led us into designing one more relevant tool. Carousel is an activity for at least 6 people sitting at rocking chairs simulating the carousel game of amusement Parks. The trainer suggests a topic (i.e homosexual volunteer) and the participant who is more eager in discussing the topic starts with his first comments. The discussion follows until the moment when it seems that it can come to a possible solution. Then the trainer directs the discussion back to its starting point, pointing out the homeblindness that strict – even successful – methodologies and attitudes bring to activities and people who normally would be able to trust in their experience and behave in different ways, in our example to include homosexuals in their activity.

The topics with the greatest interest – as they manifested in terms of number of organizations in the online survey – are: environment; art and culture; european awareness; youth policies/mobility; media and communications/youth information. The intersection and application of anti-racist/inclusive methods and Human Rights education with these themes will be of great interest for the target group and will also address their functional needs.

At last but not at least, I would like to suggest that the focus should be organizations active in more than just a local level, since they involve and influence more people and in a wider scale. USB, from the very early stages of the research, identified the organizations active in EVS as target group, since they cover the majority of organizations who actively engage local and international subjects in co-operational activities.

EVS is already funded by the EU – even if this is under reconsideration today – and, above all, it involves people from around Europe – in some cases from other parts of the globe as well – and it is a well prepared environment for spreading ideas and practices from mouth to mouth. In comparison to other youth organizations, EVS accredited organizations are more engaged in the public sphere. Their difficulties in introducing always new "others" in their small or big community and their wish to provide their local volunteers with the skills needed to live in a foreign country, make them eager audience for the purposes of CHARM II.