



Learning by Living Together,
participatory action research, by Zinaida (Armenia) & Arnaud (France),
2007/2008, Gorj County, Romania



Block 1: First ideas about voluntary work in Romania:

Romania was the hosting country for the youngsters who came from different countries to make a Voluntary Service here. For the beginning, it was important to know which kind of ideas, stereotypes and prejudices they had about the life and voluntary work in Romania. It is also interesting to know what made them to make a decision and come to Romania. According to our research majority of volunteers decided to come to Romania because they were curious about this country and had different ideas about it. It was a good opportunity to have an interesting cultural experience. Another reason was that not a lot of people are motivated to go to this country so it could be a good opportunity to go and to do voluntary work in Romania. Doing voluntary work in another country is the best possibility to be abroad and help people. It is an exchange process when you do not only get anything but also give. Having such idea of getting and giving good experience some of volunteers said:

“Okay, one year or one and a half year in my life I can do something goods, something for other people not only for me.”

Generally, volunteerism is a possibility to learn something about other cultures. When the youngsters from another country arrive in a new country, in a different culture they have to learn the system of culture in this society in order to build structural communication with representatives of this country. It is not a formal way of learning; it is non-formal education when day by day through communicating with people, participating to their cultural events participants get to know all elements of the new culture. In this process, the actor person tries to arrange himself into a new place, with new people and as other volunteers said:

“DO something useful!”

It is an also working process when you can be active without any pressure. Because normally when people work they do it for the salary but in this case youngsters can have a high motivation to work without any pressure and the opportunity to be free.

Before starting to do voluntary work youngsters normally have some expectations from the country that they are going, from the work that they will do and sometimes it is possible that the expectations can not cross with the reality. As Romania is a poor country, some volunteers especially from developed part of Europe can have very low expectations from the life and from the work that they are going to do. And these ideas can be changed during the time when they start to live in a reality. One of the German volunteers who very low expectations from Romania had shared with her experience in this way:

“I thought that it is going to be a very hard year for me probably and maybe that I won’t have so much fun (...) that I give this year to the poor children that I thought when I decided to make this volunteer service and now I am here and I see I have so much fun, I live in such a lovely city, Romania is such a nice country. I am so happy to be here and so it is not that I give so much. I have more the feeling that I get so much and I don’t give so much actually. I mean I try to give but it is more that I get than...and I thought, in the beginning I thought I have to give so much and don’t get back so much but it is the other way around”.

Normally if the participant does not want to get disappointed in a new reality it is given some advice by people who work with volunteers for several years not to have high expectations from the new reality that they go and try to accept and be ready for all kind of changes. Expectations are

coming from the stereotypes that people have about certain country, certain culture. In the case of Romania majority of the people have the idea that Romania is a poor country, prices are not very high, it's post-communist country and there are a lot of gipsy people there. These stereotypes create some images in the mind of the people and the expectations that they wait from this country are based on this. But of course not always the stereotypes are true. For example one of the volunteers told us:

“My parents came to visit and they asked if it was okay to bring their car, they were afraid it would be stolen. So I guess that is one of the stereotypes that people are stealing. But it's not like this, there are lots of police on the street. It's a pretty safe country actually”.

Normally youngsters who are going to another country the ask themselves a question: *“What would I gain from an EVS experience?”*. The answers of this questions can be different. But majority of volunteers have the idea that by going to another country and doing voluntary work they will learn to be more self-confident, live without parents with new people and just experience themselves in a situation that might be more difficult with new problems and new tasks and as they said:

“To be independent. To be much more independent than in your country with your family “mom, dad, hi”.

Block 2: Adaptation and integration

The process of adaptation and integration in rural and urban areas is different. Normally in both parts volunteers have good relations with Romanian people but the basis of communication is different.

Romania is not a well paid job country so immigrants will not come here to work. Therefore when local people see foreigners they look at them with the hope to be happy and have better future. In the rural area local people at the beginning are very open but suddenly nice and friendly communication can turn into bad. Generally volunteers describe their relations with local people in this way:

“In small villages people like to chat, it was much like “Ohhh they are the different”, we were cool for a while. Then again it can quickly turn and we are suddenly boring. Especially when working with kids or working with teenagers”.

In the rural area the process of adaptation and integration is quite different from the urban area. In the rural area volunteers have to follow the cultural norms, values, traditions which are fixed in the community. In the case if you don't follow them the nice relationship can take a rather negative turn. People know each other in the small villages so it is not very difficult to get in contact with local people.

“I would say the relationship in the village, and the relationship with our host family is very good. They are very nice, it's easy for us to live with them, and they are caring. Also the people in the village are nice, especially the children at school. I remember the first day we came it was “oh my good, a wonder is coming”. Like from another world. They had never seen a stranger before, never in their village. But they are very lovely they are so thankful. That's in the village; in the city it's different. Because it's more difficult to get in contact with people you don't know in the city, people in the organization and their friends and so on”.

In the rural area you have to know the otherwise it will be hard to build constructive communication with local people. Of course you can always use non-verbal communication but it will not be enough.

In the urban area everything is changing very fast. After the communism regime people do not have enough time to adapt into the new reality and that's why society is fighting. Here exists fight for reformation of the values, construction of the society, construction of the order. Here, it is not here like in small communities, here it is an impact of old life styles with the new European economy which is coming to this society. Contrary to the rural area, in urban area the values are not fixed and there is a fight between old cultural values and new ones.

In big cities foreigner can have a lot of possibilities:

"If you want to hear English music, you will go to the place where you can hear English music. You can have everything what you want and you do not have to search for the local people".

We can say that volunteers which are coming to work in urban area will create their own small reality which will be separated from the rest. But there are some other factors which will make them to get in contact with local people. There are some cultural differences which can create misunderstandings between volunteers and Romanian people and as volunteers work in intercultural environment such kind of misunderstandings are also possible between them. For example in North part of Europe is not accepted in their culture to hug, kiss each other in every meeting but in South of Europe it was the contrary. The volunteers from Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Norway for example were telling that at the beginning of the project it was cultural shock for them when Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian people were coming and hugging them without any reason. The shock comes as a difference of behavior linked to personal space, which in north countries is bigger and where close contacts are unusual, people don't speak a lot about themselves. Another cultural difference which can become the basis of a potential conflict is racism. People at the all ages speak bad things about Roma community, which is quite difficult to understand for the foreigner from another community. Such kind of attitude towards cultural minority can become the basis of conflict between youngsters from different nationalities.

"People speak very bad about gypsies which is far away from the point of view that I used to. Racism and discrimination is very big here which the biggest cultural difference is for me".

Another big cultural difference is connected with different ways of working. The volunteer who is coming from Germany can not adapt in Romanian society, simply because the ways of working are different.

"As I am a German and there is a German stereotype that I am much more organized in structure. There is a difference in structure organizing, I didn't grow up here and it's difficult to understand it. German people have plans, they check everything and it's quite impossible to change something and if you even do it will not be big, I was accepting the same working style with Romanian people but it wasn't like this. Maybe they have some plans, ideas but they don't communicate and one day before the event they do the things and in the end everything works all right. So it's another way of dealing with planning and working".

Block 3: Image of volunteers

The youngsters who are coming to the new country to make a voluntary work have to accept that they are not in their own countries any more. They have to be more sensitive to the local people, traditions and customs try to find the way of communication with local people. It is a long and hard process because this person has to go along with people from different social classes, cultural backgrounds etc. In this case it is highly important to speak about the image of the volunteer.

- How should the image of a volunteer be?
- What is the perfect image of a volunteer?

At the beginning, during the process of community adaptation and integration the outlook can play a big role. First judgment about the certain people can start from the outlook of a foreigner. In urban area the judgment is not as strict as it is in rural area. As in rural area people haven't gone a lot out from their small communities, seeing a person with a different outlook can make confusion in their minds. They are not ready to meet a person with a different outlook so when they see him they will judge him and as a result this person will be excluded from the community. It is very difficult to integrate into the society where almost everybody follows one way and just one person is not part of this line.

The foreign volunteer has to understand the time-management in new culture. Romanian people have their own time- management, it's not enough to speak with a person and establish something, it's necessary to make those people to understand what you want from them. . They don't have the same time-management like us, for them *imediat* can mean tomorrow, or very future, sometimes *maine* doesn't mean tomorrow, it can mean next week, next month, maybe several minutes. Time is more relative here and it can be more relative for the people who don't understand these items from Romanian culture. So how to get involved to local community? It's like to build trust, you can't speak about trust and the person starts to trust you. You have to do something, to get involved in the community, to take into consideration all the stakeholders, to deal with stake holders, to react all the inputs.

The perfect image of a volunteer is the perfect image of involved and warned citizen in the community. Actually he becomes a part of the community and tries to improve the environment and the small things that he will do during the period when he will be there. The steps that he does in one community will not be the same in another one.

You have to accept the differences. It's a continuous process where you learn step by step. Of course you get some abilities dealing in some situations; you never know what incident can happen with you. The perfect volunteer is that tries to do the best and tries to improve himself.

There are some ideas how the perfect volunteer has to be:

- More flexible
- More creative
- More talkative
- Less shy
- Keep smiling

Block 4: Working and learning process

In the project of Voluntary Service there are three participants:

- volunteers,
- local community
- NGOs-sending and hosting volunteers

During this project each of these parties' learns and develops its working and thinking way. A volunteer who is coming from another country to make a voluntary work in a foreign country tries to implement some activities and projects which will change the situation. During this process they can just have a hope that the work that they do has some result for the local people or for the target group with whom they work. Some of the volunteers who were working in the local community with kids shared with their experience in this way:

“I hope I can change something in their life but sometimes it is hard to see the difference because I have to work with many children and they are bad in school. It is very hard to see that your work has an effect but I see how much the children love me, how happy they are”

Certainly during this process the volunteers meet a lot of obstacles and learn how to accept the reality as it is and try to find other ways of solving the problems. This kind of experience they can use throughout their life. This kind of education helps youngsters to understand the importance to accept the difference of cultures and find a way to work and live in a new a reality. Mainly this process can be different in rural and urban areas. In urban area it is easier to organize the working way rather than in rural area. In rural area people care with their everyday life concerning the things they used to do in the village. The volunteer who is coming to do innovative things in their villages will have some difficulties to reorganize their working day. People have already their fixed schedule which starts with the sunrise and sunset of the day and for the volunteer it can be difficult to make people to do some changes in their lives as they have a rather static life and don't want to have any waves. Because such difficulties in the working process, many volunteers can lose their motivation. Volunteer from Germany said:

“So sometimes it is also that conditions are so hard that you are unmotivated and you have to see that it is not only you who is wrong maybe that it is just that you have so hard conditions which you are working in that it is clear that sometimes you are unmotivated or that you are working with unmotivated colleagues”.

At the same time meeting some obstacles during this process they learn a lot of things from the life experience. Firstly they have a positive experience by working in intercultural environment. During this process volunteers have an opportunity to learn more about different cultures, build constructive communication with people whose cultures are quite different from their own ones.

For me it was very difficult to get along with Romanian YES. Romanian people can't say NO because they always want to seem friendly. But accepting the answer YES it was difficult for me to see that it never works. During these nine months I understood that everything is possible in Romania.

In the local community local people have the opportunity to have a contact with a person from another nationality. Making interview with the coordinator of EVS project, we heard such opinion:

“You are able to touch a person from another culture. It is not just a physical appearance there, not only words in books, the direct relationship between him and a person from different community. This is the biggest thing to do, apart the European dimension and intercultural dimension spoken theoretically. You can write a lot of things on a paper, but you would never be able to write on a paper the feeling that you had after dealing with a person who took part in such project full of adrenaline, full of smiley faces, and full of new experiences”.

For the hosting organization, it is important to have a volunteer because volunteer can add to the image of the organization. Generally, volunteers transfer the vision and working objectives of the

organization into local level. Sometimes this cooperation is not strong because of differences in cultures and working way. Volunteers cannot accept the way that organization work and it can become one of the reasons that volunteers loose their motivation to work but because of cooperation and good result of the work it can go in a better way.

Block 5: Attitude towards cultural and ethnic minorities

During this research process, it was obvious that both in rural and urban areas exists discrimination towards cultural and ethnic minorities especially in the case of Romania towards Roma community. Roma people are living throughout Europe but as in Romania, they are a lot and are in the attention of the people it is more crucial. During the interview with one of the coordinators of EVS project, we heard such kind of opinion:

My opinion is that Romanian society is not open to religious, ethnic minorities and not at all open to sexual minorities.

For the volunteer who came from another country to Romania it is very strange to see such kind of discrimination towards Roma people. One volunteer from Denmark said:

"I was in the bus and saw that there was a free place next to gipsy woman. I went and sat next to her. Everybody started to look at me in a very strange way. It is the same when I speak with Roma people at the street everybody looks not in a good way".

Volunteers who were working with Roma and trying to integrate them into Romanian society shared with us the ideas they got during this working process:

*"They cannot cope, they... I think it is not just here in Romania. I think we can see this in other countries. Everybody has a feeling that **Roma people are very, I do not know, they do not want to work, they do not support them, they just simply don't care.** They live there in the forest their way and I do not care. **They are like parasites of the state because they receive money or they do not work.** I think it is not only here in Romania but especially here in Romania they have this feeling for Roma people because Roma are going to other countries and they project bad perspectives about Romania because everybody thinks: "Oh, you are going to Romania. This is a gypsy land." And this is not true. So this is why Romanian people cannot cope with Roma".*

Another opinion was a bit different:

"Well, but I think you can't say they hate them in general because the huge majority hates them I got to talk to some people, too that said : "Oh, it's a great work you do. You are trying your best to get them back into society. I mean I don't think it is a good attitude this attitude because I think they have their own society, their own world views and they are not the Romanian world views maybe but anyway, I think you can't just say they hate gypsies in general and many of them and many of the, or not many but some of them really appreciated the work I did anyway. Although, they were jealous that we are not doing the same thing with the Romanian kids that are having problems as well. I think they have quite a point because there are not only gypsy kids that are having problems in school and we shouldn't treat the gypsy kids better than the Romanian kids just because they are gypsy kids".

By the point of view of many volunteers, there is a kind of non-formal rule in Romanian society:

"If you want to be accepted in Romanian society, you don't have to like Roma people".

Representatives of Roma community in rural area said:

“If we say that we are gipsy we will be excluded from the society, nobody will allow us to be in one table with Romanian person”.

In Romania also exist a Hungarian minority but because of historical changes majority of Hungarian people knows Romanian but they do not speak Romanian because they think that it is a Hungarian territory. However, Romanian people say that now it is a Hungarian society and “Don’t you want to integrate to our society?”

However, the social conflicts between Hungarian and Romanian are easier to deal because they have different prejudices between those groups and concerning to gipsy they have something common: they don’t like gipsy. They can have many differences between each other but gypsies make them one unity. When they have to speak about gipsy the attitude is changing it’s like WE (Romanian and Hungarian) and The others (gipsy).

Volunteers who were working with both sides were told different stories about these relations:

“What is interesting for me that both of them tells that they suffer. Hungarian people suffer because Romanian came to their territory and Romanian people suffer because Hungarian people don’t want to respect the culture. And every time when they see a foreigner they always tell their version of the history and want to keep the identity”.

The authors:



Zinaida from Armenia



Arnaud from France

The current thoughts are part of a participatory research project that two EVS volunteers (Zinaida- Armenia and Arnaud- France) hosted by Youngsters without Borders and ARDR conducted with the co-financial support from the Council of Europe. The views and reflections are the full responsibility of the authors.