

Senior Volunteers in Europe – SEVEN Project

1. Project Relevance

The primary concept of trans-national voluntary service is mutual intercultural learning by bringing together people from different social and cultural backgrounds. This can be of great benefit for seniors, with regard to “lifelong education” and in view of older citizens’ high motivation to continue learning, thus giving them an opportunity for personal development and detecting undiscovered skills. A European exchange of senior volunteers addresses the issues of active citizenship, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue and personal fulfilment, since volunteers are involved in a learning process, which ideally results in being active in their own community after the experience abroad.

Beyond that, the SEVEN project is relevant with regard to the networking of organisations and volunteers, as well as to the empowerment of seniors in terms of lifelong learning. Furthermore, SEVEN intended to provide advice and give an informed point of view to national and international institutions dealing with active ageing, educational tools, active citizenship and social cohesion. Processes of networking (the idea was to set up a platform where all the participating organisations can exchange information) benefit communities as well as volunteers. The network aimed at increasing the intercultural and intergenerational competence of seniors, improving conflict management and ameliorating their knowledge about the European Union.

2. Background and Aims

The aim of the SEVEN project was the establishment of an international network of organisations promoting senior volunteer exchanges. Its 29 member organisations include NGOs, local governments, universities and research centres with a sustained experience in the co-ordination and management of senior volunteer programmes. The network was developed from a series of pilot projects financed by the European Commission. It was also co-financed by several local governments from Europe, which were actively involved in the network (in Italy, Austria, Belgium and Germany). It was carried out as an implementing framework to coordinate and manage trainings for senior volunteers for trans-national exchanges.

SEVEN aimed at creating a "European Wide Space" in which all the involved organisations – local governments, NGOs, universities and institutions working with volunteers – are facilitated to implement their mobility and exchange projects. The main innovation addressed by the network was the organisation of trans-national exchanges for senior citizens, since their needs regarding education, training, accommodation, as well as duration period differ from the needs of youngsters. Its main objective was to set up a platform where participating organisations can easily exchange information and take part in a common project-implementing framework. SEVEN further intended to provide advice and offer an informed



Project name: Senior European Volunteers Exchange Network – SEVEN

Project number: 40

Coordinating organisation: Lunaria

Countries involved: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Turkey, United Kingdom

Types of organisations involved: International networks, Public institutions, NGOs, Formal education institutions, Research institutions

Implementation level: Local and European levels

Website: <http://www.seven-network.eu>



point of view to national and international institutions dealing with active ageing, educational tools, active citizenship and social cohesion. In addition, it aimed at increasing the intercultural and intergenerational competences of seniors, improving conflict management and enhancing their knowledge about the European Union.

In 2011, the European Year of Volunteering, the European Association for the Education of the

Adults awarded the SEVEN network the 2011 Grundtvig Award for the most outstanding Grundtvig project in 2010 for its contribution toward networking volunteers, active ageing policies and increasing mobility.

3. Description of Target Groups

SEVEN had three main target groups: European Institutions, regional and local governments and civil society organisations dealing with international voluntary service. The latter are, in fact, oriented mainly to the promotion of these activities among young people, so the network tended to induce them to extend their activities to higher age groups as well.



There is no specific information concerning the number of participants in the SEVEN network. However, according to a survey conducted in 2008, which assessed the long-term impact of senior volunteer exchange programmes on hosting and sending organisations and on senior volunteers, women constituted the majority of the participants. The age group of 66 to 75 year-old individuals was the major age group. Furthermore, most seniors had previous experience in volunteering before the exchange. The

vast majority of the participants were retired; a small part was employed, self-employed or unemployed.

Altogether, about twice as many volunteers were hosted as compared to the volunteers sent abroad. They were mainly sent to the Central and Western Europe, e.g. Germany, Austria or United Kingdom. The majority of hosted senior volunteers came from the Western, Central and Northern Europe. The regional limitation of the exchange to mainly Central and Western European countries may be due to the country of origin and to the international networks of the participating organisations.

Regarding the exchange duration, it was stated, that the vast majority of the volunteers stayed abroad for two to three weeks, whereas herewith more seniors stayed for three weeks than for two weeks. In most of the cases, senior volunteers had to speak a foreign language. This shows that a lack of foreign language knowledge may be a barrier to travelling abroad as a volunteer. Most of the hosted volunteers were working in the area of social work, followed by ecology, education and culture.

4. Outputs and Multiplying Outcomes

One of the main tools developed during the establishment of the network was the website: www.seven-network.eu. With over 40.000 contacts since its public launch on April 22nd 2008, the website became a reference point for organisations and volunteers interested in international voluntary service for senior people.

The website was conceived to give as much information as possible to different target groups. Therefore, a simple homepage was created, which offers main network information. A section called "What can I do?" provides possible users with the basic information about the activities promoted by the network and about the possibilities to take part in them. The

body of the homepage is a dynamic section where relevant news about the network and the new European program SVP are constantly published. Also to be found on the website is a database of short-term international voluntary service opportunities and a section called "SVP partner finder" for the organisations interested in building up a bilateral partnership for the new European program. Furthermore, the website has a very important role of document repository. A blog was also opened, which is devoted mainly to senior volunteers (but not only) in order to give them a chance to report and share their experiences.

A "Guidebook to Senior Volunteering Abroad" was edited and published. This is devoted to interested organisations and potential senior volunteers. The work is entitled "Setting Up an Exchange! – The Merry Play of Senior Volunteering Stage by Stage", and accompanies potential organisers step-by-step in setting up a senior exchange. The publication includes reports and tips for a good project management. The booklet is edited in English, French, German and Italian. A training course in seven sessions was also edited, tackling the following issues: Introduction to Voluntary Service Abroad, Motivations and Expectations, Skills Audit, A Learning Experience and How We Learn, Cultural Awareness and Intergenerational Learning, Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution, as well as an Evaluation session. The training course is published in English, French, German and Italian. Both publications can be downloaded for free from the SEVEN website.

5. Impact and Sustainability

The SEVEN network was an attempt to mainstream volunteering across several different political issues. The first contribution was toward "active ageing" policies: since the European population is aging more and more, volunteering in general is a good way not only to stay active, but also to have a high quality life in terms of social networking and personal achievements. Active citizenship was also addressed by the network in order to foster social cohesion and solidarity among generations and at the same time among people from social and ethnic groups. It is important to treasure the skills of those who are out of the labour market, but still have capacities and expertise which can be useful to society.

The network demonstrated that such exchanges are also important educational tools. The volunteer abroad is a source of curiosity, and people from the hosting community can learn a lot from these experienced citizens. Simultaneously, volunteers can learn from the new environment they visit and in which they work.

A significant impact of the network on individual skills and competences, such as foreign



language and technical knowledge as well as social competence, could be observed. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the improvements in work performance

skills and in the ability to manage diversity exhibited some degree of sustainability, since they were still being reported up to six years after the exchange. Another sustainable impact of SEVEN is its website, which is still active.

In general, the policy of sending senior volunteers abroad had a positive contribution to the demographic change that is in progress in all the European countries and to the idea of strengthening the individual's responsibility for social well-being. The SEVEN network advocated more space, visibility and resources for the informal education sector so that it could cover and reach all those who could not be reached otherwise. Thus, it is a matter of

interest if and how the senior volunteer exchange is promoted and established in the home communities.



6. Educational Process

The efforts of the SEVEN network concentrated on catering the educational needs of adults and, more specifically, senior citizens. It intended to circulate information and expertise. The website and database aimed at representing a virtual meeting point to publish possibilities of placements in a foreign country. Besides, the website circulated information among the network partners and other interested parties, and it provided links to many other Grundtvig projects dealing with seniors, active ageing and volunteering. Training volunteers and representatives

of hosting organisations included sessions on intercultural learning, conflict management, knowledge of the European Union, motivation and expectations devoted to volunteers and organisations of the civil society, assessment of own skills, and the way we learn.

Due to the mainstreaming approach of the network, senior exchanges were presented with an educational perspective in many European meetings and conferences. Furthermore, a partner finding device was elaborated on the project website in favour of organisations looking for a partner to start a bilateral exchange programme.