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PREAMBLE

Volunteering as an opportunity for local democracy/participation development

Volunteering is one of the means of resolving the most vital problems in local societies. Thus, it helps to answer needs of the people in any age with special focus that can be put on currently growing number of elderly people and arising needs of youth. When the latter group is concerned, their skills and competencies enhancing their chances at the labour market can be developed through volunteering. They also should be involved into decision making processes and volunteering can be one of the means of fostering such process. When it comes to the ageing European societies it have to be recognised that volunteering might be seen as an answer to the elderly people's need for social security in both meanings - physical (with relation to health, day care, etc.) and societal (with regards to feeling of remaining an useful member of the society). However, there is a need to promote possibilities for such involvement amongst members of particular age groups in the local level.

There are various kinds of socially excluded groups that do not have opportunities to influence decisions-making processes at the local level, as they face problems in reaching with their matters local authorities' interest. On the other hand, local self-governments often tend to close themselves to the inputs coming from the outside of the group holding the power. In effect, important amount of current issues crucial for large number of local societies' members cannot reach local authorities perception. Basing on this observation, we may assume that an answer to such situation could be involvement of properly organised (see below) volunteering and activities of voluntary sector. It can lead to opening-up the local public debate agenda as volunteers and civil society organisations that are managing their activities might drive local authorities' attention to the most important people needs (by using a "bottom-up" approach). However, there are several obstacles that have to be overcome in order to reach that goal (see below).

Volunteers (volunteering organisers) might be also seen as a local social change animators / leaders of the local societies. They are aware of people skills and capabilities and know how to organise their involvement properly in order to maximise effects of their activity. Such volunteering organisers might be also able to identify the most vital problems of local societies and suggest the activities involving local society members that will answer to them. However, while doing so, they

are also faced with several important obstacles and need institutionalised means of support in order to be able to expand their activities.

1. Obstacles that have to be overcome

One of the obstacles that prevent people's greater engagement into volunteering activities is their mentality and false perception of volunteering in the countries like Poland. While in the most of the Western European countries it is widely recognised that people involved in volunteering can also achieve several important benefits themselves (i.e. new knowledge and skills), in Poland the situation is different. From one hand, volunteering is being related to the area of social help (care) and adjusted to the values of social solidarity. On the other, by young people it is being used for the pragmatic purposes (i.e. to gain "next point in the CV"). When, in general, the latter situation is nothing bad, it has to be recognised that it may harm positive image of volunteering, being an activity useful for everybody – institutions/organisations involving volunteers, particular local societies, as well as volunteers themselves.

Thus, there is a need for building proper culture of volunteering. It should be based not only on full recognition of volunteering role for particular individuals and whole local societies, but also on clear rules of volunteers involvement (i.e. when it comes to the amount of time they might donate in such way and a their costs refund). The latter resolutions might help to overcome volunteers feeling of being misused or undervalued.

When willing to develop volunteering at the local level in cooperation with different stakeholders, other important obstacle is related to limited access to the founding that in the local level comes from the local authorities. Thus, from the one hand, local NGOs compete with each other to obtain finances for their activities, and on the other, they become dependent on local authorities. Both aspects of that situation hinder enhanced cooperation of the local organisations also related to volunteering development.

Other problem is related to the low level of the culture of cooperation between local self-government authorities and civil society organisations. However, it has to be admitted that reasons for that are on both sides. Local authorities quite often lack willingness and capabilities to open for cooperation with civil society and listen to their arguments. They also sometimes might be tied up by restricting legal rules, not letting them to act with sufficient flexibility. That can be accompanied with local authorities' clerks' low organisational skills that disturb their cooperation with different local stakeholders, including civil society representatives. On the other hand, NGOs often represent demanding attitudes towards local authorities and while addressing them they are negatively oriented since the beginning. This is not helping in forming proper relations between both parties.

Last but not least, on both sides, including local self-government authorities' employees and volunteering sector activists, often there is poor legal knowledge. Thus, they are not enough aware of possessed rights and duties, as well as existing legal rules and procedures enabling their usage.

Several activities could to be taken up on different levels of local social life and should include:

- 1. Support volunteering as free expression** of a significant and positive contribution improving the lives of people, and strengthening communities and civil society. Volunteering should be a free individual choice not subject to specific obligations.

People should feel free to volunteer in a way that fits their own personal situation and possibilities. Information about the benefits and possibilities to participate and volunteer is an important aspect to improve and introduce in the educational systems.

2. **Promote institutional resolutions supporting volunteering development at local level** :- i.e. a body coordinating local activities of different stakeholders with relation to volunteering is needed, such as volunteering centre;

3. **Stimulate volunteering** :

Local Authorities and others who want to encourage and support participation and volunteering need to investigate better what are the incentives that make people interested in participating and volunteering. All citizens have that interest if they are triggered in a way or for something they are really interested in or concerned about.

4. **Positively recognize and value volunteering** :

A systematic approach to volunteers' involvement recognition and valuing is needed on the side of local authorities as well as civil society organisations (including such activities as i.e. thank-giving days, diplomas for engagement, special awards, etc.);

5. **Support the development of communities of interest and place** :

Local authorities should be encouraged to support community at a small scale, both for people where they live and for people who share interests in certain topics.

6. **Build a culture of volunteering educating youth on that issue in schools**, but in a practical and attractive way, showing them that volunteering can be an fascinating way of spending time and own interests development;

7. **Support and develop a system of trainings for local civil society members (including volunteers) and civil servant** dedicated to the interpersonal and managing skills development and presenting knowledge on legal rules and procedures related to the cooperation at the local level in common problem-solving processes (including participative democracy mechanisms) – including also practical activities aiming into experience development;

Special **practical trainings on volunteering** should be dedicated **to local leaders, but also to teachers and parents** (showing them the role and value of volunteering for their children, other people and whole local societies);