

Welcome to the 4th blog post on the effects of international volunteering projects that are being written regularly by the researcher Jonathan Robertson from Scotland in the frame of the research, which has started in March 2017 and will continue until November 2018. In the frame of his research, Jonathan is following volunteers participating in different volunteering activities all over Europe and finding out how volunteering is changing their lives and helping them in building a career and in personal development. Apart from volunteers, we are also following the work of their hosting organisations. We are interested in how they see the added value of volunteering projects for their organisation and how international youth work has changed their local communities.

Reading this blog will take you: 5 minutes

BLOG #4

Make Me Dream

Innovative practice: ITER, Sweden

“I think I got goose bumps many times during these Network Meetings we have before and after. It's really 'wow!' what you see there.” Sitting in the building of the Municipality of Gothenburg speaking to Ida Palm, one of the Social Workers for ITER, I want to hear more about these Network Meetings.

I first came across ITER, part of the Municipality of Gothenburg, through other organisations in Slovenia and Spain active in Erasmus+ Volunteering Activities. As part of my research seeking examples of effective practice in Volunteering Activities across Europe, these organisations, who had worked with ITER, told me I needed to see what they were doing in Gothenburg.

Lasse Pelttari, another of the Social Workers at ITER, explains, “the target group is between 18 and 29 years-old and they are usually not in any employment or in school or they are drop-outs from school”. I ask Anna Lilja, the Co-ordinator of ITER, about young people with fewer opportunities. “We don't use this word; we use 'undiscovered' opportunities.” ITER connect with these young people and work with them to support them going on a Volunteering Activity to another European country.

In Gothenburg, I hear from the ITER team and some of the young people they have worked with how Network Meetings are important parts of the process - before going on a project and after they come back. The idea is to have a range of key people involved in the future of the young person round the same table with the young person all pulling in the same direction. It is for the young person to choose who comes and invite them, with the help of ITER.

Anna explains, “it could be family members of the volunteer, and the professional network - it could be their doctor or employment officer – and it could also be friends”. She continues, “In this Network Meeting, you look at the activity plan, and talk about their dreams – what does this participant dream of when they come back, and how do we help this person to actually reach the goals?”

The collective is where the strength lies, in Lasse's view. "For the young person it is important to see how many people are around that are concerned for them. In one way you lift the question from the person to a family issue and this is why we have these Network Meetings. You need the context and this is very important for staying in the context, where you have support. Because alone you haven't got the tools to survive."

Lasse recalls the story of one mother of a volunteer who attended: "She had tears coming from her eyes when she saw what happened to her son. In her eyes she had seen remarkable changes in his attitude. She sees him coming up to the adult stage. If the family tells you this, you are on the right track."

Later in the day I meet up with Henrik, one of the young people ITER worked with, who went on an Erasmus+ Volunteering Activity to Iceland. "The network meetings were good. I got to invite all my friends and family and they were there. So, they got to know what I was going to do and why I was going to do it. And to know what I was going to do when I got back, what we had spoken about with ITER, what my biggest fears were, what I hoped for. It was really good."

And ITER's approach, helped by the practice of the Network Meetings, is creating real results for the young people and the city. Anna concludes, "Usually there is about 80%-85% that we send [on Volunteering Activities] or work with, who are in work or are studying when they are finished with ITER. We think this is a very good number for this target group."

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Written by Jonathan Robertson, freelance researcher and youth work trainer, currently working on a research project on how Erasmus+ volunteering activities contribute to the employability of young people.



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