

Welcome to the 8th 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 #8

From the grassroots up – Volunteering Activities in Madrid

“The point is Vallecas is one of the most under-privileged neighbourhoods in Madrid – with low rates of income, and high rates of school drop-outs,” Jorge Hermida the Director of Coordinadora explains. I am in a neighbourhood centre in north Madrid to hear from the people involved about Coordinadora, Europa Joven (Madrid's European youth centre) and the work going on presently to bring Erasmus+ opportunities to “young people in vulnerable situations”, as Jorge describes it.

Jorge is one of those people that has a gravitational effect on a room - when he talks people seem to turn their heads to listen. “Coordinadora is an NGO which was founded in 1989 with the aim of bringing together social organisations that work with children and young people. We are formed of 20 youth centre of child and youth at risk - all in this area.” Jorge tells the story of how “in 1997 Coordinadora launched its first European project. Since then we have run more than 40 projects relating to education and youth. This experience has given us a great understanding of how European programmes work.”

This story leads up to 2006 when Coordinadora approached the Mayor of Madrid to talk about the need for greater support to connect the young people of Madrid into these European opportunities, like Erasmus+ Volunteering Activities. Jorge explains, “an organisation does not get money for staffing costs from these Erasmus+ activities. An organisation needs money to support the project and do well. We don't want to send people outside and leave them on their own. We need to take care of our people abroad - and when young people are hosted here too.”

Coordinadora reached an agreement with the Madrid municipality to finance a European youth centre – Europa Joven – to support young people across Madrid, not just Vallecas, into accessible international opportunities. Jorge continues, “since 2006, Europa Joven has sent more than 100 people and hosted around 50 - all Madrid.” The municipality continue to fund Europa Joven to this day.

But one question kept coming up over recent years. As Yuki Marquez, the European Projects Co-ordinator from Europa Joven, outlines: “we sent a lot of people, but most of them - I can say maybe 80% or more - are graduates, they have studied, they have already travelled. OK,

this is good, because they have improved their competences but, the target group we are working with are not taking advantage of this opportunity. So, the main question we have is: why do the young people with fewer opportunities not participate in Erasmus+ Volunteering Activities?”

Through following and exploring this question they came to hear about some of the key obstacles. “And, so, we found some answers: mainly it is lack of information, access or lack of resources. For example, we think that everyone has the internet at home, but in Spain it is quite expensive. Also, there can be a lack of motivation - because it is something they may not see as interesting or relevant to their lives. Aswell, these young people have many problems, so maybe this is not the main objective for them at the moment”. Yuki adds, “we had a partners’ meetings in February and visited an association of Coordinadora and one educator said, ‘for us it’s difficult to send girls because some of them at 14 are married or engaged’. We don’t see those barriers, but they exist.”

In their mission to involve more young people in vulnerable situations, one of the main resources they used was the Coordinadora network – a return to roots. As Rosario Coronado, European Youth Advisor from Europa Joven, describes: “one thing that has been very important is that the volunteers we have sent have come from different organisations in Vallecas that are part of Coordinadora. So they are boys and girls that have been users of these organisations and now some of them are volunteering in them.” Rosario continues, “for us it has been important to have the support of their organisations, because they know them well. They know what are their difficulties or possible problems, so this helps us to prepare them better and to help them better when they are abroad. We work as a network”.

Through their work over the years Coordinadora and Europa Joven have got a strong sense of what it really takes to work successfully and connect vulnerable young people to transformative international opportunities. Jorge explains the different elements required. “We really need for this to be well done. We really need the extra structures. It’s not only the young person - it’s Balia [one of the neighbourhood organisations in Vallecas], it’s Coordinadora, it’s Europa Joven with support from the Madrid municipality, and the partner in other countries. But I really think this one month is going to change the lives of the young people, because it’s opening minds and offering opportunities”, he concludes. “This is the reason that we are interested in the extra effort.”

“Our perspective is to prevent this long-term unemployment. It’s to prevent it,” Yuki is very clear. “Sometimes the young people we work with are not unemployed - they may be studying - but they are far from the labour market. But we offer to improve their competences and this is the way to avoid long-term unemployment.”

“Sometimes the young people we work with are not to avoid long-term unemployment.”

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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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