

## **VOLUNTEERING: EXPERIENCE OF SENIOR ADULTS**

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**Abstract.** *The article deals with volunteering which in European Union is highlighted as one of the key possibilities for people to participate and include themselves into the international society life, solving various problems, such as poverty unemployment, public safety, organization of the meaningful leisure time. It analyzes communication and collaboration between international senior volunteers in two countries – Lithuania and Greece - sharing their experience in acquiring new abilities and skills, needed for knowledge-based society in the action based environment.*

**Key words:** *experience, participation, senior adults, volunteering.*

### **Introduction**

Transformative processes in the society influence changing structure of people's age. In Lithuania, as in other European countries, people live longer, rate of birth is decreasing, the number of population is influenced by migration losing a big number of young people. The structure of population in European Union is changing: the number of people above 65 is increasing – in 2010 it was 17,4 % while in 1985 it was 12,8%.....

Senior people are motivated to be socially active – to volunteer, to be employed, to learn, etc. It is a new phase of life which only started in the 20th century. (Mikulionienė S., 2011, p. 265).

Volunteering is a way of empowering and integrating citizens into active communication and experience sharing between the generations. This activity helps develop values and makes influence on education, employment and citizenship. In the majority of cases, volunteering is practised in various social and environmental organizations and institutions of informal education. Successful volunteering needs a relevant legal environment to ensure safe and flexible volunteering acceptable to both, a volunteer and a hosting organization. In Lithuania, volunteering is defined by Volunteering Act, 2011 as a volunteer's unpaid work for the benefit of the society stipulated by a volunteer and volunteering organization. Volunteering is a way of human empowering, integration, occupation and an important factor in the process of creating social communication and cohesion. This activity helps implement the main social values with the influence on education, busyness and public life. It may also improve interrelations, communication and cooperation.

Nowadays volunteering has gained a significant national and international sense, as it is closely related to human expression, active citizenship, which is the

essence of democracy. Volunteering is an opportunity for everyone, regardless of gender, race, nationality, religion, political belief, age or health, to use personal skills and experience, gain new knowledge, make friends, get involved in working and change the social life of the country. Volunteering promotes individual development, expands social benefits, general human capacities. It is time devoted for the benefit of other activities and the opportunity to exercise, improve personal, professional and social competencies.

Volunteering is an activity arising from a person's altruistic intention to perform some work without being paid for it. A person who can act this way is called a volunteer. The main goal of such a person is to help others and be socially active. It is one of the natural human features – to be happy by helping others. Internationally, in different countries volunteering is understood differently, but the process of volunteering is similar. Volunteering is especially important for the country's economy because at low expenses national product is created together with intercultural education.

In 2011-2013 VMU Department of Education and the University of Thessaly (Greece) carried Senior Volunteering Project "Communication, Empowering, Integration, Experience For Senior Age Volunteers (C.E.I.E.)". The aim of the project was to promote international communication and cooperation of both sides Senior Volunteer is sharing experiences, gaining new abilities and skills for the knowledge society. The cooperation between Greece and Lithuania was established in order to draw public attention to the importance of volunteering in Lithuania and Greece (Trečiokienė, Gedvilienė, Karasevičiūtė, 2011). The project was developed through bilateral cooperation and opened international area for successful lifelong learning process.

*The object of the research:* experience of seniors participating in volunteering.

*The goal of the research:* to reveal communication, empowerment, integration and experience of senior participants in volunteering.

*The objectives of the research:*

1. Theoretically based volunteering.
2. Having conducted the research of experience of participants of Lithuanian and Greek seniors in volunteering to highlight the cultural and social expression of recent activity.

*Methodology and methods of the research*

A qualitative study was conducted in 2011-2013. This study aimed to highlight the cultural and social expression of volunteering experience. It was based on the European Year of Volunteering basic objectives and other studies - adult needs to participate in volunteering at national and international level; content analysis of documents regulating volunteering, expert analysis and volunteering experience in organization performance.

- Semi-structured interview survey is used.
- Content analysis method is applied to the analysis of interview results. The results are divided into five categories (Lifelong learning, volunteering

experience, the ability to volunteering, volunteering benefits and volunteering expectations) and several subcategories (Participation in education, training professional or personal development, concept of Lifelong learning, volunteering experience, knowledge, relevant volunteering, general skills). Interview method was used to reveal the details of the informants views on volunteering at a later age.

### **Volunteering as a form of adult learning**

Nowadays an adult person should strive to participate and plan his life because of its complexity in either social or political sense. Senior citizens are expected to be socially active. People of different age groups should constantly learn because changing cultural, ethnic and linguistic conditions make life complicated. Meeting these challenges is not very simple. Otherwise, adult learning through volunteering may help create new norms of social communication.

Volunteering in a society has become popular not only as a way being social in helping others or communicating among different age groups but also as a possibility to learn. Volunteering is a very important instrument in realizing Lifelong learning strategy in European Union. Besides, volunteering gives opportunities for an adult to join informal learning. Informal learning opens abilities to educate personal, social and professional skills. But it is worth mentioning that a volunteer is naturally involved into self-learning. Depending on his motivation, competence increases because a lot of things in life a person learns himself, analyzing and evaluating his experience. That may improve involvement into labour market thus expanding employment possibilities and making a person competitive. Taking part in volunteering, an adult has a possibility to learn and perfect three groups of skills:

- *personal*, related with a person's inner motivation and his personal needs. Only a personal interest and values make an adult to seek for something new, valuable by helping others and self-expression.
- *social* which appears working in a group – it may be an activity helping each other and the condition where a helped person lives or the whole group of volunteers.
- *professional* closely connected with the process of learning and qualification as part of professional skills. Junior volunteers use volunteering as a means of acquiring professional skills before starting their career.

All the three groups of skills are closely connected with volunteering as *learning, interrelations and conditions* that encourage a volunteer to be active in life-long learning.

Kurapkaitiene N. and Borovskaja O. describe three principles of volunteering that determine volunteer's involvement.

*Conditions* – they are material and structural conditions of the volunteer, i.e., working place, organizational rules, cultural norms, a responsible person, labour contract etc. Creating conditions influences volunteer's involvement into organization and his working motivation. The main task of the conditions is to ensure increase in volunteering.

*Relations* – these are relations of the organization where a volunteer appears. It is the structure of conscious and subconscious interpersonal processes in the organization. Volunteers usually keep in touch with different groups – workers, clients and other volunteers. They have to understand and find encouraging relations. Mostly because of relations, volunteers stay long in the organization, and relations become the strongest motivation in volunteering.

*Learning.* A volunteer appears in new possibilities and conditions of learning that encourage him to learn not only technical or mechanical but also social, professional and personal competences. (Gedvilienė, Karasevičiūtė, 2013).

The authors stress that in spite of the conditions for informal or self-education, a volunteer still gets into a loop of at least minimal and sometimes quite vivid change.

In creating conditions for volunteers, it is important to set what information and skills are necessary to make volunteering successful and how a volunteer should be integrated. It is also important to clear up a volunteer's motivation. Positive conditions and relations together with constant learning abilities positively influence the choice of volunteers and educating new skills.

For a successful integration, a volunteer should always learn. The issues of volunteer learning and progressing are discussed in the programmes of European Union carrying such attitudes:

- volunteers gain knowledge and skills during volunteering activities, not in advanced preparation for social work;
- volunteers are prepared in advance for specific activities following specialized programmes and systematic courses, workshops, individual consultations (Jonutytė, 2007).

In volunteering the process of informal, self-modified and experimental learning takes part during relations between organization members and a volunteer, volunteer and client, volunteer and other volunteers, also during personal self-knowledge and gaining new professional skills. It is difficult to distinguish some common volunteering skills because of different conditions, activities, structure.

During volunteering, personal progress, social values and common human skills are educated. This is illustrated in the volunteering model.

Skills gained in volunteering can be prescribed to the recommendations of European Parliament and Council to the skills of common life-long learning. Recommendations give 8 skills: communication in the mother tongue, communication in a foreign language, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology.

These skills prepare people for adult life and is the basis for life - long learning. They create personal welfare and progress, active citizenship, social integration and occupation (Wilson, 2000).

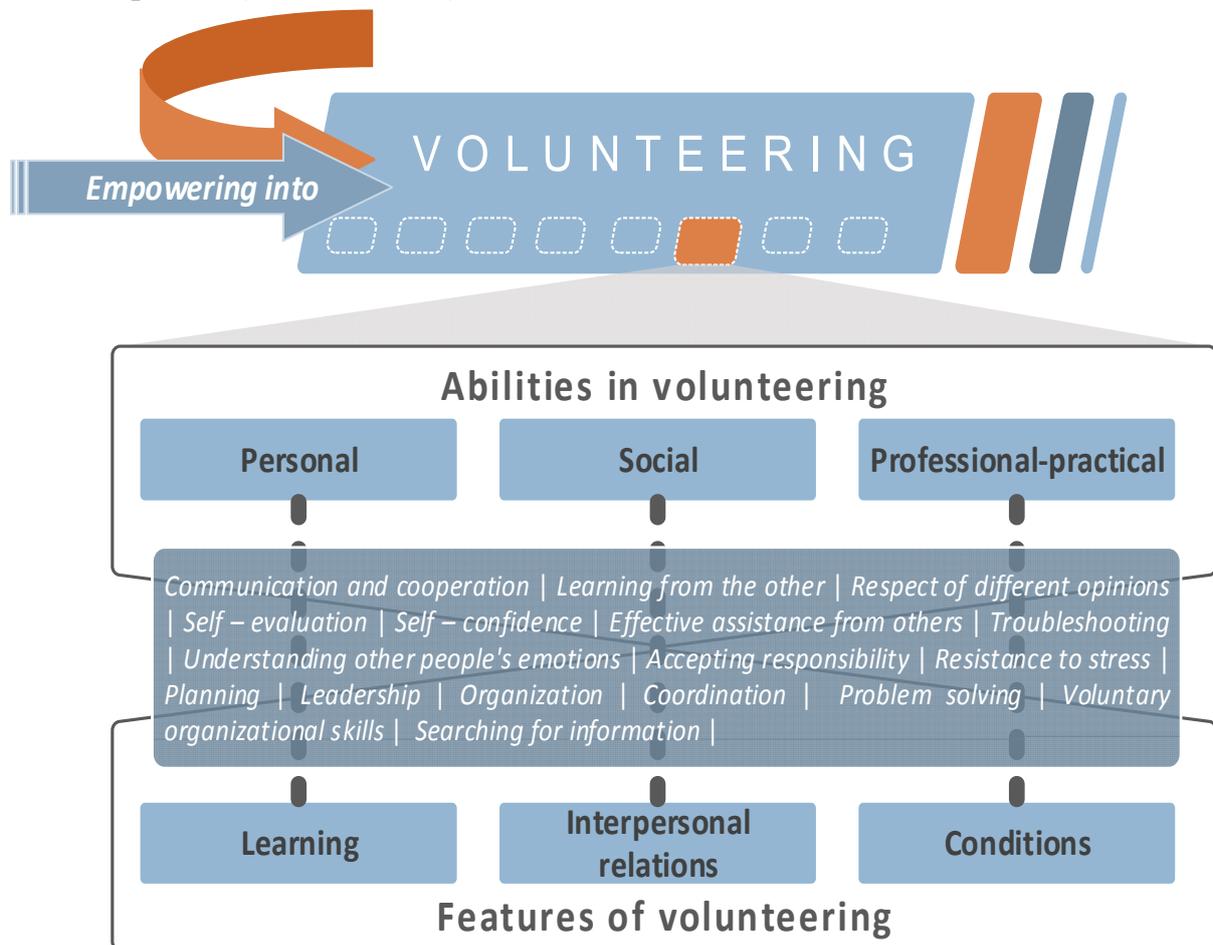


Fig. 1 Model of volunteering

Volunteering service gives a person possibility to communicate, educational experience, to be active in social life. Non-governmental organizations also encourage the possibilities for people of different age groups to be involved in learning through volunteering, to realize their skills, share ideas and values, to communicate.

Speaking about volunteering activities of non-governmental organizations, the concept of informal learning is used. Informal learning consists of different courses, workshops, conferences offered by the same or different non-governmental organization in a neutral atmosphere, but it also should be remembered that learning is practised during the volunteering activity itself (Gedvilienė G., Karasevičiūtė, (2013).

To sum up, volunteering gives a person possibility to gain experience in different fields, to know oneself, educate skills, widen knowledge and

strengthen responsibility for himself and community. These are universal skills, obligatory for every person and they educate critical confident personality.

### **Results of the qualitative research**

The qualitative research was carried out during 2011-2013. The goal of the research was to highlight cultural and social manifestation of volunteering experience.

Informants of the research. Twelve senior volunteers participated in the research. Six Greek senior volunteers and six Lithuanian senior volunteers were selected as the informants. Their age varied from 54 to 70 years. In the reasearch participated nine women and three men. Answers of informants have codes (A, A1, B, B1, C, C1, D, D1, E, E1, F, F1). Of all the informants, ten had higher education, one of them spec. secondary and one high school education. The content of the responses to the interview was analyzed by employing the qualitative content analysis method.

*The research instrument.* The informants answered to 11 questions. The interview was carried out in an individual conversation with the informants.

In this research the answers of the informants are divided into five categories and several subcategories: Lifelong learning (Participation in training, Training in the field of professional or personal, the concept of Lifelong learning), Voluntary experience (Available experience of voluntary activity, Hoping to gain the experience of voluntary activity), Skills in volunteering (Knowledge, important for voluntary activity, key competence), The benefits of voluntary activity (Personal life, Professional life), Expectation of volunteering (Lithuania and abroad). Category *Lifelong learning* and three subcategories: Participation in training, Training in the field of professional or personal, and the concept of Lifelong learning. In the research different experiences of volunteers have been highlighted the. Many of the informants educated themselves only vocationally, seeking the development of career or key competences. It is interesting that the informants have not been motivated to participate in lifelong learning activities; their knowledge of Life Long Learning is deep.

In the discussion about the conception of LLL the informants were saying that LLL is the possibility of continuous education all life, however its conditions to adjust to changing world, the new technologies, help for spiritual and human development. In other words the LLL is the permanent updating of the key competences.

The informants expressed their different views on how they realize lifelong learning. A Lithuanian senior says:

*This is a development of human personality, a spiritual advancement. It opens many possibilities to get to know- and to learn innovation, to learn to solve problems, the basis of knowing the world, its people, customs and culture.*

Greek senior volunteers noticed that the man personally and professionally develops while learning all his life. The informants expressing their opinion said: *... when people help each other, then they will improve (A1), people can learn at whatever age or profession necessity (C1),... I was always learning even when I was here in Lithuania (E1).*

The study noted that the seniors from two countries (Greece and Lithuania) lifelong learning understand as help to each other and opportunity to improve regardless of age.

Category *Voluntary experience* has two subcategories: Available experience of voluntary activity, hoping to gain the experience of voluntary activity. In the discussion about volunteering, the informants actively shared their experiences, mindful of where, how and when they helped to the old people or sick loved ones.

The seniors from Lithuania said: *... I am not in any voluntary organisation but often participate in the Church activity, take care of old people (B,C), ... I am participating in various voluntary activity promotions (E).*

Some informants are permanent helpers in the activities of the Church for many years, working for the Caritas organization whose activities based on the principle of helping others. One of informant said, that: *...I am a volunteer in Caritas organisation for many years, so I always have to care and help somebody (F).*

The Greek volunteers revealed that: *... This experience is the first for me (B1, E1, F1), .... I have worked with disabled people (A1),...helped handicapped children (F1).*

The participants of both Lithuania and Greece participating in volunteering hope to gain a good and useful experience: *... I hope to learn something new, unexperienced, and unusual. Many thanks to those who give! (C, E, F), ...I will gain learn new things, new forms of interaction with other people in ways sharing love and support with others (C1). To be able to better understand humanity (D1), ....I want to work with other people (E1).*

In summary, the most important is the internal motivation to try to do what elates the other. It can be noted that Lithuania and Greece senior volunteer participation in voluntary activities, the most important is the internal motivation, a special desire to help- others, the desire to do what elates the other.

Category *The benefits of voluntary activity* have two subcategories (Personal life, Professional life).

According to the respondents: *... Knowledge is never too much. (F), ... I would like to learn more about volunteering (B, D), ... team communication and collaboration, and listening to another (B, C, F).*

Greece seniors have expressed very similar views on the importance of knowledge and the need for engaging in volunteering. The informants assumed that: *... I have knowledge, however, it is important to be able to communicate*

*and to know a foreign language (D1), ... I have social skills, but communication and cooperation is the key (F1), ... Specific volunteering needs specialized knowledge, but help is the most important (B1, C1), ... just patience and cooperation (A1).*

All the informants believe that general competencies is a key of volunteering, but the Lithuanian informants emphasized the communication and collaboration. For Greek informants language skills are essential to communication with the citizens of other nations. According to them, living in the information society relevant computer skills are necessary, in helping to develop communication networks, to find relevant information. In spite of the fact that the participating informants are older adults, they want to volunteer and improve the performance of it.

In summary it can be stated that Lithuania and Greece senior volunteers have the knowledge of how to carry out voluntary work, but for them it is important to know a foreign language, which opens up more opportunities to participate in international volunteer programs, as well as the importance of acquiring intercultural communication and cooperation skills, and be able to operate a computer.

Category *The benefits of Volunteering* distinguishes two sub-categories (Personal benefits and Professional benefits). When there was a question about private usefulness of participation in volunteering the informants were active speakers: *Many of them promised to share the experience with families, friends and co-workers. Attempt to live joyfully today and not in the future (A, B1, C1), ... from this experience I hope to gain more self-confidence. This would be a positive step in my life (B), ... it will help care about the loved ones (F).*

Greek informants were attentive to personal expression of emotional well-being. They said that „... *I will try to be polite, gentle, more understanding, (A1, D1), ...tell about volunteering to my relatives, friends and co-workers (F1, ... to help take care of family and community members (E1).*

Some of the informants believe that the person improves professionally in volunteering, and that means an opportunity to interact and collaborate with a variety of professions, getting to know their identity and share their experiences. The seniors shared and argued that: *... it is necessary to change internally (A), ... hope to improve communication when working with people of different age (B, C), ... get to know people's identity and share their experiences (F).*

These answers are very similar to Greek seniors, too. The informants said, that: *...it will be easy to learn to communicate while working with different age, education and the needs of human beings (A1, B1, D1).*

There is a tendency that the benefits of volunteering, for Lithuania and Greece senior volunteers (personal and professional experience) were most associated with the interaction and sharing of experiences with loved ones, colleagues and friends.

Category *Expectation of volunteering* has of two subcategories: *Expectation in Lithuania and abroad*. Whereas the informants are the participants of the Grundtvig programme, so they are developing the voluntary activities in Lithuania and will develop voluntary activity abroad.

Lithuanian senior volunteering expectations in Lithuania expressed the hope of earnest sharing. The seniors said, that “...sometimes people take goodness without trust. Perhaps it is because of what they experienced in childhood as they grew, in communicating with friends and acquaintances. Their own limited thinking and unwillingness sometimes is the enemy to improve (A) ..., ...I sincerely hope that it will be able to hear others and feel useful as well (B, F), ... volunteering will enhance confidence, promote rational use of various issues or caused problems, and I think that it will be something to learn and improve skills (E, D) ... I would ... the mutual understanding between the people, thought-provoking (spiritually) would not only give to others, but gets back. I hope that Lithuania will be our spiritual, benevolent and voluntary country, if not now, then tomorrow (C).

A lot of hopes and new experiences Lithuanian senior volunteers foster away to another country. They say that: .... *I hope that communication with foreigners is easier; people are more confident and want to help each other. I will learn a lot from them (A, B, D), ... I want to know as much as possible about organized volunteering (F).*

Similarly, Greek seniors think about volunteering in their country: .... *I hope to meet new people, to help the most needed, to share the experiences (A1, B1, C1, D1, E1 F1).*

Informants' expectations show that they have a strong motivation of participation in volunteering. They were in high interest to develop volunteering abroad. Greek seniors believe that: ... *Volunteering will give confidence and possibility to communicate (A1, B1, E1), .... I hope to know a different culture, people and their customs, some phrases of their language (C1, D1, E1, F1).*

The informants expressed the hope to find new friends and get to know another culture and tradition, and to compare the similarities and differences with volunteering in Lithuania. There is a tendency that the Lithuanian and Greek seniors hoping to interact and collaborate with others, and those who need help, get to know another culture, customs and traditions, learn the language, to gain volunteering experience and to share their personal experiences.

Having compared the Lithuanian and Greek volunteer results, it should be noted that the Greek perceived lifelong learning as helping each other and a possibility to learn at various ages is more vivid than in Lithuanians. The senior Greeks noted that throughout their development humans improved both personally and professionally by learning continuously; the Lithuanian and Greek senior volunteers noticed that the most important factors in volunteering were inner motivation, extraordinary wish to help others and doing things that make others happy; Lithuanian and Greek senior volunteers claimed that they have the

knowledge how to do volunteering jobs; however, it is important for them to master foreign language and computer skills; the volunteering benefits for the informants of both countries in terms of personal and professional experience are firstly associated with communicating and sharing with their close relatives, colleagues and friends; when participating in volunteering the senior volunteers hope to communicate and cooperate with other people, get to know other cultures, share their ex-perience and listen to others. The idea of lifelong learning reveals that people are innately different. Differences are those things which could be improved, as intellect, talent, emotional sensitivity, psychological insight. For a grown man to build their own successful life it is recommended to be an active participant in professional and personal activities. One of the most important documents in setting a guide for European lifelong is the European Commission Communication on Adult Learning: It is never too late to learn. This paper highlights the growing role of adult learning and its impact on their personal development and fulfillment.

In this study, we aimed to provide one of the Grundtvig project involved volunteers - senior opinion about volunteering. Interview method was used to reveal the details of the informants' views on volunteering at a later life.

### Conclusions

After the Lithuania and Greece seniors were interviewed, a survey showed that the Greeks more than Lithuanians understand lifelong learning as assistance to each other, and as an opportunity to learn at different age. Seniors Greeks observed that the evolution of human life personally and professionally is improving in constant learning. Volunteers of both countries, said:

Internal motivation is the most important in participation in volunteering an, a special desire to help others and to do what gladdens others, the knowledge of how to perform voluntary activities. However, for everyone it is important to know a foreign language and manage e to work with a computer, to experience volunteering as both personal experience and professional activities.

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