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Conceptual Framework (Methodology) Of The GGA Project And GGA  
Toolkit On Volunteering

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“We need to think big. Volunteering is means by which ordinary people can use their human rights to best effect. Think of the right of assembly, the right of freedom expression, the right to work together, to achieve, etc. Think of the aims you’ve identified. Those human rights are embodied in volunteering and social activism and that’s how many people without realizing it use their human rights, their civil rights to good effect. Civil organisations need to show that they are proud to be engaging in volunteering, they need to do more publicly to recognize their volunteers....” (Liz Burns, former international President of IAWE)

In memory of Liz Burns  
with whom I spent a whole happy day  
talking about volunteering in 2002

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Introduction

1. Non-governmental organisations are “the tissue” of volunteering
2. Voluntary organisations and voluntary work
3. Volunteering organised from bottom-up as a response to the needs of individuals and local community
4. What do civil society and active citizenship stand for
5. Voluntary work in the field of social inclusion
6. Voluntary participation of older people in civil society is possible through their taking on different social roles
7. Learning in voluntary organisations

### Conclusion

### Literature and References

## Introduction

**GGA (Go Get Award) project and its Toolkit**, all project activities indeed, focus on rendering older people fully participating and actively contributing members of local, national and also European communities despite the fact that people in later life are burdened with social stereotypes and ageism suggesting that they belong to the category of people of whom nothing much is expected. This leads to older people's social exclusion and paves the way towards their discrimination and stigmatisation. After their long and responsible adulthood, after losing the role that once defined them, they may become dependent and supported, losing their identity and their sense of commitment. Loss of identity can result in low self-esteem, depression, a loss of self-confidence, all of which threaten their ability to connect with other people. On the other hand, with the older people's retirement society loses its social capital: knowledge, abilities, social networks, experience older people have that so far has been used for its benefit.

In the GGA project, we are thinking about both volunteering (preserving status quo) and social activism (transforming and changing).

In the GGA project we firmly believe that older citizens should not be only allowed, but, to the contrary, encouraged to contribute to important decision-making processes, that they should take up their part of the responsibility for the successful functioning of society.

We further believe that education can and will contribute to better older volunteering having a strong impact on the targeted adult educators, older volunteers and community. The transformational effect of this GGA project has been felt from its very beginning.

Organised volunteering is an invention of the 19th century. Volunteering appears in civic societies, social movements, if and when they exist, or in not-for-profit economic undertakings. It may be an expression of identity, ideologies, aspirations, etc. In some countries, volunteering appears in the caritative field or educational field bringing alternatives to the existing structures. In Eastern European countries volunteering was

hindered when civic society disappeared for a certain time with Karl Marx believing that the State and the State alone had to take care of people's needs.

In today's changing world of social disruptions, there is a growing number of needs that the State cannot meet efficiently. This is done by civic society.

Further, the GGA project includes the development of an educational TOOLKIT enabling educators to help older volunteers as to change the outdated image of inactive, frail and declining older people much the type of image that these viral CORONA times have made more alive.

In the GGA project, our objectives related to active old age are to make older people

- better understand their own emotions and needs and their own challenges as well as talents;
- better understand the active bonds they can have with other generations and their peers if volunteering and other possibilities of giving can turn them into rights holders (dependent older people have a rather reduced number of rights!);
- become familiar with already existing best practices in partners' countries and legislation backing up volunteering.

Further, the Toolkit will make educators familiar with the topic and scope of older adult volunteering as well as with the educational activities aiming at the empowerment of older volunteers and volunteering organisations.

Participants in the educational Award programme supported by this Toolkit will become familiar with the nature and possible areas of volunteering, gender issues in this field, with how to organise volunteering and make it visible, how to distribute the roles. They will be more knowledgeable about the areas of volunteering and the important role (older) volunteers play in today's local communities and indeed entire society. Volunteering will be presented through the narrations of volunteers and presentation of volunteering organisations (Brochure). We namely believe that narrations are the best way to come closer

to potential volunteers and convince them that becoming a volunteer is a good choice, a choice that matters.

## 1. Non-governmental organisations are “the tissue” of volunteering

If you go to the Netherlands, a GGA project partner’s country, you may come across *Driekant*, a large educational provider in the vicinity of Utrecht. You will be explained that the name stands for the three sectors of the State: public, private and civic sector at their best working hand in hand for the benefit of individuals and society. Notwithstanding the recognition of the existence of the three sectors, many countries actually dwell upon *a dual model: public and private* sector, the civic sector being rather marginalized. If you come to Driekant they will explain to you the mission of civic organisations, they will talk to you about how NGOs are led, how volunteering is organised, the virtues that are required of its leaders. They will discuss **the characteristics of volunteers**.

Then you might move to Bulgaria to discover the important older people’s cultural role and volunteering in some large primarily State top-down organised organisations which are now in the hands of volunteers. You might go to Baltic countries which again are different. To summarize,

*the culture of building civic society and volunteering differs in different EU countries depending on the countries' historic, economic, political and socio-cultural conditions.*

In most Eastern European countries, however, the development of civil society was slowed down as a result of Karl Marx's belief that civil society »opening up room for greed«, was not necessary. Marx believed the State could unite people. Thus the State became of overwhelming importance in some EU countries where the situation has been changing as well over the last decades. I.e. In Slovenia, former Yugoslavia, associations disappeared, only the fire brigades survived the Second World War. The Slovenian Red Cross was set up in 1945 as a semi-political organisation where volunteers were employed to collect donations. *The Young technician* (slov. Mladi tehnik) was a State founded movement for socializing young people with technics, providing them with skills needed in the emerging industry. Yugoslavia

had some large organisations in between...between the household and the State keeping volunteers and others active and connected.

## 2. Voluntary organisations and voluntary work

The defining characteristic of voluntary organisations and older volunteers is their variety! Therefore, it is often difficult to generalise about them. What is a voluntary organisation? Normally, this is an organisation in which responsibility for policy, decisions and finances lies with members who give their time and services voluntarily (they are unpaid or poorly paid). Keith Percy (1998) defines a voluntary organisation as an organisation that is not an informal or an ad hoc group, or is not set up by statutory authority, is not commercial in the sense of being profit-making, or mainly dependent on fees paid by private individuals. Voluntary organisations need to have an orientation (mission statement) explaining why members join the organisation, what the organisation is doing and what it wants to achieve.

Voluntary organisations are most typical organisations of civil society. Members can always quit, they cannot be made to do things. Being a member of a voluntary organisation means experiencing equality and democracy »but voluntary organisations equally stimulate people to judge, select, take decisions on their own,« argues de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.

Partners in the GGA projects collected different definitions of voluntarism. “They do it voluntarily” mostly means they are not paid for it. And they mostly do it within organisations that are not-for-profit. But in fact, this is not true. Volunteers are rewarded for their work in many ways and sometimes even low paid.

Volunteering does not equate unpaid work. Volunteering should be rather considered through the prism of leisure time; the type and time volunteers are ready to donate for the benefit and welfare of individuals and community. Voluntary work can be performed on personal, individual level (mostly in family circle and within one’s social network) or on organised level within voluntary organisations.

Volunteering ensures that social capital is preserved: knowledge, skills, experience, trust, relationships. Social capital preserves and enhances the power of relationships and is a kind of productive investment into social relationships.

The GGA Compiled EU report and the Brochure comprising narrations of volunteers and about volunteering have shown that older European citizens are volunteers in rather different areas: social inclusion, health, education, culture, transport, protection of nature, sports, fire brigades, etc. On the condition they keep upgrading their knowledge and meet ever more demanding “professional” standards of voluntary work they can take on the most diverse roles as a supplement (not replacement) to the work done by employees.

For European Union volunteering is *an important social activity* leading to a more cohesive society based on the basic European values; respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. Organised voluntary work should be supportive of these values. If volunteering is an important social activity it should be based not only on actions and activities (for instance educational provision for older people, social services, volunteering in culture) but also research, education, guidance, solid policies, public campaigning. If volunteering is a social activity it is mostly shaped by free individuals who are to put together their knowledge, skills, time for the benefit of all. It is not a mercantile activity.

In short, volunteering is not based on mere goodwill and a good heart as it is often believed and claimed. It requires “professionalisation” i.e. education, research, standards, know-how, knowledge, skills, competencies.

Volunteering may also be *a leisure time activity* leading eventually to a professional career. Quite often it is conceptualized as an amateur, non-professionalized activity of philanthropic or humanitarian nature, working with people in need. In some countries, voluntary work is encouraged as a way to increase one’s employability.

Volunteering needs to be heard and seen and recognized. It exists only when the others are aware of its distinctive existence.

### 3. Volunteering organised from bottom-up as a response to the needs of individuals and the local community

Today in all EU countries volunteering is mostly organised bottom-up. No wonder that in the times of many *major social changes* (breaking up family ties, increased divorce rate, broken neighbourhood ties, intensive urbanisation, large housing estates, over-indebtedness) the voluntary sector and its activities are getting ever more present in our societies.

Volunteering is an expected response *to* both individual and community needs: it is there to better our lives, alleviate the increasing inequality and social unfairness, counteract the *major social changes* that lead to *social exclusion* that used to be related to economic precarisation (poverty) now regards also relational precarisation.

### 4. What do civil society and active citizenship stand for

Civic organisations are different and they do make a change. They carry freedom. They improve life. They prepare for active citizenship. They are space and arena of relationships between the household and the State. Civil organisations are not based on mercantile relationships. They are much more, they are meant to improve people and society. They step in where the State and the market are short or fail. Moreover, they identify the needs and meet them. Currently, the good functioning of our societies still depends on the three sectors: *the State, the Private Sector and the Civil Sector. Civil sector was one of the great social innovations of the 20th century though often left in shadow.* This sector has been systematically neglected and the economic and research data did not reveal its existence. No wonder data about volunteering -mostly taking place in civic society- are also scarce and inaccurate which has been revealed by the GGA state of the art review of volunteering in partner countries. Therefore, the civil society sector was defined in a restrictive way. One could learn what civil society was not and not what civil society was. The source of income is not the sole difficulty in civil sector. A much greater difficulty is of *conceptual or ideological nature*. Given the great number of different organisations of the civil sector, there is a tendency to emphasise their differences and not their common characteristics.

**Civil society?** The term describes a form of *social organisation* that is neither simply economic nor political, where *democracy*, *freedom* and widespread *solidarity* are essential regulatory concepts.

*In civil society, we are expected to build and maintain an active relationship with society particularly in the role of volunteers.*

Furthermore, civil society is closely connected to what we call **active citizenship**. There is an essential difference between citizenship, which we are born with, which is given to us and which connects us with the State. Active citizenship is not a fact, it is not given. Much the contrary, it has to be gained, nurtured, shaped throughout life. It is a lifelong process that connects us with society.

Active citizenship means constructing society in different domains: education, health, sports, social relationships, culture, economy, technological development, climate change, environmental protection, etc. (Korsgaard et al., 200, Marshall, 1977)

Civil society is extremely diverse in general and in each of the EU countries and no wonder that definitions of voluntary work differ as well.

## 5. Voluntary work in the field of social inclusion

Volunteering seems to be the best strategy for social inclusion that is social inclusion of socially deprived groups. The term social exclusion was coined in 1960 to be, in 1980, followed by another term and concept of social inclusion. In 1960 unemployment rate was barely 3% and the inequalities in society were overcome by bringing weak individuals back to the strong society. Today, the situation is different.

Major social changes (breaking up family ties, increased divorce rate, broken neighbourhood ties, intensive urbanisation, large housing estates) bring about separation within society and inequalities.

Social exclusion which used to be related to economic precarisation has now been extended to other types of precarisation and digital exclusion. This society has created new forms of inequality, including digital exclusion, an element of contemporary social exclusion.

Active ageing as one of the best political visions of old age is about meeting individual and community needs and exploiting individual abilities. Digital inclusion of older people is about equality, decency and it is a human right! Digital exclusion is mostly about inequalities among generations and social groups. Moreover, digital inclusion is about the much-needed interconnectivity of individuals and organisations in the contemporary networked society.

*Major social changes are difficult to be faced and overcome by governments alone.*

## **6. Voluntary participation of older people in civil society is possible through their taking on different social roles**

In family, our social roles are those of mother, father, son, daughter, granddaughter, etc. In companies, we can be corporate volunteers donating time, money, knowledge to some humanitarian organisations. In civil society, we are volunteers out of at least two categories of motives: personal and community ones. Civil society largely dwells upon volunteering. (Wolfe, 1989, p. 233)

Active ageing is currently considered to be the best political vision (WHO, OECD policies) of old age. But it can be also very subjective, a life course phenomenon. Namely, one does not become active in old age just like that. One ages through life and one's active ageing may become more visible in old age. Active ageing may be considered a social, political matter or as a matter that concerns individuals. Policies were started due to the changing age structure in European countries. There is an increase in the number of older persons and a decrease in the young and working populations. The majority of younger older Europeans reach the third age in relatively good health with a more or less secure income and have more social roles than in the past. These societal changes need new active ageing strategies addressing issues of employment, health, leisure time, education, active citizenship and social cohesion.

Things happen in civil society only if we manage to convince, if common spirit is created, if knowledge is passed on.

## 7. Learning in voluntary organisations

Generally, both adults and older adults join voluntary organisations to *do* and not to *learn*. However, doing and development of doing seem to require *learning*. In some voluntary organisations, there are *formal learning activities* that can be recognized as education and the Award Programme is such an educational activity. (Percy, 1988). Formal learning activities comprise teaching, discussing, training leading assessment and certificates or public recognition. *Informal learning activities* that take place in voluntary organisations are perhaps less easy to identify and less likely to encompass systematic and sequential learning (learning from experience, learning through social interaction, practice learning, apprenticeship learning).

## Conclusion

In some countries, older people's voluntary work is well developed but it is rarely accompanied by research, education, guidance, public campaigning. Today, in pandemic times two tendencies have been reinforced; the domination of informatics over our lives and the come-back of the State as a regulator of capitalism. Against this background civil society is overlooked though voluntary work has become essential and more visible. We are entering a new era of civil society and voluntarism.

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