



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Can we Empower Youth through Volunteerism? Results of an Empirical Study on Romanian Youth

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### Abstract

In today's society, involving young people as well as elderly in volunteer activities allows both individual development and the development of the communities in which they live. Volunteering has a positive impact both on the person who gets involved voluntarily, developing social skills and practical skills, and on the community and society as a whole, being a source of multiplication of social networks based on cooperation and mutual trust. The premises of our research are the conclusions of different studies that show that involvement in volunteering is not influenced by gender or age. Instead, it has been shown that people with a better education are inclined to this type of activity. Thus, this article is presenting the results of an empirical study among persons aged between 18 and 35 years. The main objectives of our research were to identify: the importance of volunteering activities and the level of involvement in that kind of activities; the main areas that are preferred by Romanian youth; the advantages or inconveniences for involving in volunteering activities.

**Keywords:** *volunteer; social solidarity; volunteering activities; individual development; skills.*

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### **Context**

In any society, regardless of its level of development, volunteers have a significant role in reducing “suffering” and improving the living conditions of people in vulnerable categories. The involvement of young people, but also of the elderly in these kinds of activities allows and facilitate for them individual development and also the development of the communities in which they live. The contribution of volunteering to individual development is reflected in the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities both in the labour market and on an individual level. The contribution of volunteering to the development of communities is highlighted in facilitating the social integration of individuals, especially those belonging to disadvantaged communities, as well as combating the risk of social exclusion of vulnerable social categories, thus contributing to “rising social solidarity” (Paceșilă, 2017: 19-29).

Involvement in various voluntary organizations allows the individual to learn (and to form) certain skills (Knepper, D'Agostino, Levine, 2015: 211-212) through which he/she can adapt more easily to the requirements of the XXI century society. Also, it can make him aware of certain qualities that he possesses and, thus, helps him to develop in a harmonious way, helping him to find the professional fields in which he can work in the future. Volunteers should be much more than just service providers, but rather they should participate in the decision-making process and to the development of the programs in which they are involved.

### **Defining volunteerism - a challenge**

Volunteering represents “a free activity” (Ferrand Bachmann, 2000: 13), which is unpaid and which is for the benefit of the community and its members. According to R. D. Putnam (2000), an intense volunteer activity promotes “the development of a sense of social responsibility”, the creation of strong social ties and, last but not least, contributes to social harmony and cohesion. Thus, volunteering is an important and popular mechanism that allows young people involved to participate and to generate positive changes in society; it is an activity that is becoming more and more “a mechanism to engage young people in global peace and sustainable human development” (Guzman, 2006). In Romanian scientific literature, volunteering is defined as a formal activity that the individual carry out “without any wage, by free choice, in a formal way, within an organization, working for the benefit of the others or of the entire community” (Voicu&Voicu, 2003a: 3). Thus, volunteering is an activity carried out voluntarily, following a choice and based on an individual motivation, which does not pursue financial gain (Handy et al.<sup>2000: 45</sup>; Rochester et al. 2010), being often carried out through a non-profit organization or within a community initiative, but also informally, directly for the benefit of other people or of the community.

Volunteering is understood as a parallel career, a “hidden side of the professional career” (Simonet, 2010: 53), which leads to highlight unequal social relationships right down to the fond of associative activities. On the one hand, there are the volunteers who integrated into the world of work, who withdraw from their commitments new resources and, on the other hand, there are individuals in real difficulty with regard to employment, who really have no choice but to work for free. For potential employers, volunteering is a motivating alternative for vocational training, it increases the motivation of individuals for a company that promotes volunteering and

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the individual is aware of his own identity and individuality, better due to the skills acquired through volunteering

Volunteering has a positive impact both on the person who gets involved voluntarily, developing social skills and practical skills, and on the community they belong to and society as a whole, being “halfway between individual and collective action” (Viallon, 2017: 11; Hustinx, Lammertyn, 2003: 167-187) and in the same time, being a source of multiplication of social networks based on cooperation and mutual trust. Youth volunteering is associated with “informal and non-formal learning opportunities”(Kiilakoski, Kivijärvi, 2015: 47-61) and the development of youths' personalities, abilities and skills to enable them to successfully meet the challenges they will face at different stages of their lives.

According to the European Union, voluntary organizations are defined by the following characteristics: a) have a formal or institutional basis; b) are either non-profit or do not bring profit for their members or managers; c) are administratively independent; d) their administration is carried out with “disinterest”; e) aims at promoting the public interest (Catalactica, 2011: 32).

### **Volunteering. A brief analysis on European and national data**

An analysis carried out at European level, through a Eurobarometer carried out by the European Parliament, shows that involvement in volunteering is not influenced by gender or age. Instead, it has been observed that people with a better education are most likely involved in this type of activity (Eurobarometer, 2011). According to 2020 Strategy, volunteering contributes to sustainable human development. The 2020 Strategy further recognizes that the capabilities and effectiveness of a National Society are directly related to its ability to mobilize, manage and empower volunteers in all its communities. In addition, the Europe 2020 Strategy aims to develop the mobility of volunteers across the European continent “as one of the ways to train a mobile workforce for the fast-changing knowledge economy” (European Commission, 2018: 11).

In Europe, according to Eurostat statistics, at the level of 2015, the countries where the share of people (aged over 16 years) who carried out “formal voluntary activities” was very high were: Norway – 48.0%; Netherlands – 40.3%; Denmark – 38.7%; Luxembourg - 36.7%; Switzerland - 36.5%; Finland – 35.5% (Eurostat, 2018). These percentages confirm Inglehart's theory that “economic development tends to produce rising levels of volunteering” (Inglehart, 2003:69-70). At the opposite pole, well below the European average (19.3%), were the following countries: Cyprus - 7.2%; Hungary - 6.9%; Bulgaria - 5.2%; Romania - 3.2% (Eurostat, 2018).

Also, the scientific literature highlights the fact that “differences in participation and/or volunteering between countries were often explained by cultural or structural factors” (Voicu&Voicu, 2003b: 143). On the other hand, there are theories that state that “in Eastern Europe, the lower cross-border volunteering rate was largely attributed to the political past” (Kalyenska&Kaleynska, 2018; Pantea, 2015: 271; Kaleynska, 2019: 25-26), that there are some patterns specific to Eastern European countries which can explain mainly all social phenomena (Porumbescu, 2012: 268-274) and that poverty is not a determinant factor of prosocial behaviours, such as, for example, volunteering (Lichter, Shanahan and Gardner, 2002: 90).

And this aspect can be explained also by Inglehart's theory, also according to which there are two hypotheses about how values change, the assumptions arising from the *pyramid of needs*, developed by Abraham Maslow (stating that people act to meet a

number of different needs, which are pursued in hierarchical order, according to their relative urgency for survival): the socialization hypothesis and the scarcity hypothesis (Inglehart, 1997: 22). If they are belonging to communities, or societies with a low standard of living, they will always be concerned with satisfying basic needs, lower levels, and less with self-realization needs (Inglehart, 1981: 881). Those who are part of societies where the level of development is above average are more concerned with meeting the needs of self-realization, having good health, a great interest in environmental issues, a high level of personal responsibility, participation in political and civic activity, tolerance of diversity, etc. Inglehart says that this assumption is “similar to the principle of marginal utility in economic theory” (Inglehart&Baker, 2000: 23-24).

In fact, Inglehart's model is the one that formed the basis of the “World Value Survey” waves, the results of which exemplify very well the arguments in the paragraph above. For example, in the case of the Romanian society, the results obtained in the survey from 2010-2014 highlighted the following conclusions: of the 1503 total people surveyed, only 1.8% were active members in charitable or humanitarian organizations; 1,3% - they were active members in organizations for environment protection; 2,5% - active members in self-help groups and mutual aid groups; 4,4% - active members in labour unions etc. (Inglehart et.al, 2014). Active involvement in volunteer activities can contribute, to a significant extent, to the development of a civic engagement, at regional and local level, determining people - in our case, youth, “to engage in society” (Olimid, 2014: 78).

Regarding “formal voluntary activities”, the data provided by Eurostat in 2018 showed that the first three countries where the share was the highest were: The Netherlands (82.5%); Norway (74.5%); Finland (74.2%). At the opposite pole were: Bulgaria - 6.3%, Romania - 3.2%; Malta - 0.9% (Eurostat, 2018). Statistical data provided by Eurostat show that the rate of volunteering is higher among those with a higher level of education, usually more than a third of those who volunteer being graduates of tertiary education. All age groups participate in volunteer activities, but studies have shown that, most often, “the age group most committed to volunteering are young people aged under 30 (Rigman, 2009). At European level, there are a number of measures and actions that are being implemented to encourage citizens to get involved in volunteering. The best known of these are: the Volunteering Database, the European Youth Portal (where young people can look for and find volunteering opportunities at European level) and European Solidarity Corps.

Beyond the statistical data, which illustrate a better or poorer development of this sector in the EU economies, the general conclusion that emerges is that volunteering leads to increased civic engagement and contributes to social development, increased social solidarity and, on long-term, to social inclusion, which represents important topics and themes strongly related to “social action and social praxis within the process of European integration” (Olimid, Georgescu, 2017:43).

In Romania, the legislative framework that regulates the volunteering activity is represented by the Law on Volunteering (195/2001), amended by Law 78/2014 and Law 175/2016. Within the Law 195/2001, volunteering is defined as “the activity of public interest carried out on his own initiative by any person, for the benefit of others, without receiving a material consideration”(Law 195/2001). This activity must be carried out within a non-profit organization (public or private), called *volunteer benefit* and based on a written contract, which stipulates the rights and obligations of the volunteer, but

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also the specifics of the volunteer activity provided. In the Law no. 78/2014, which regulates the volunteer activity in Romania, article 23 specifies the main benefits that this type of activity can have. Thus, in competitions organized for positions, if two or more candidates obtain equal scores, public authorities and institutions and employers of may award additional points to candidates who present one or more volunteer certificates obtained from volunteer activities, issued under the conditions provided by this law, in the situation where they constitute selection criteria (Law 78/2014).

From a statistical point of view, the involvement of Romanian youth in volunteer activities was relatively low during 2000-2010. For example, the data of a study developed at European level highlighted the fact that, in 2011, Romania was among the group of European countries with the lowest level of involvement in voluntary actions (together along with Greece, Italy, Hungary, Poland and Sweden) - less than one in five young people carrying out such activities (Eurobarometer, 2011). After 2011, the share of young people who have volunteered has started to increase, both as a result of civil society projects, programs of the European institutions to raise awareness of the importance of this activity, and also as a result of newly introduced legislation regulating the benefits of volunteering. Thus, according to a study conducted in 2018, only 12.4% of Romanian youth have volunteered in the last 12 months, compared to 31% of youth from European Union. However, the younger they are, the more involved they are in volunteer activities: 15.7% in the age group 14–18 years, compared to 9.4% in the age category 27–29 years (Bădescu et. al, 2019: 46), most of those involved in voluntary associations, at a relatively young age, carrying out these activities as pupils and / or students.

### Methods

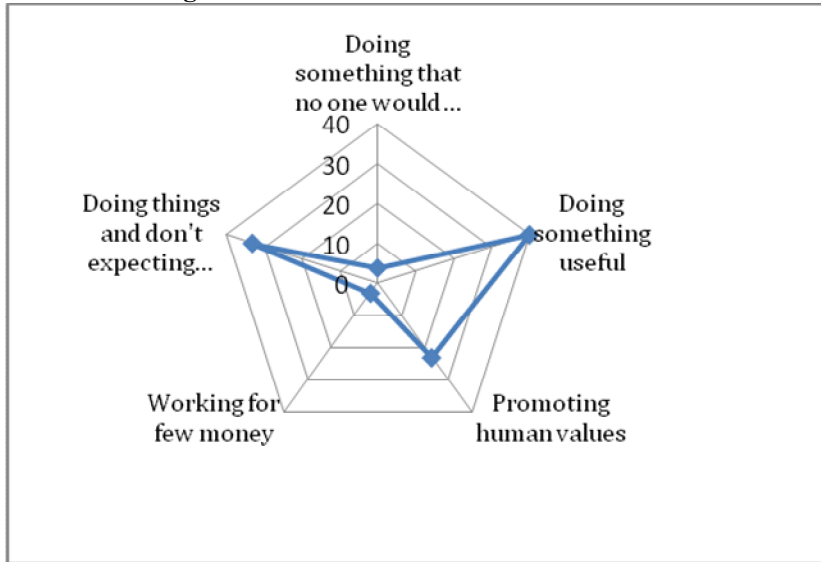
In order to verify the hypothesis that we have constructed within our theoretical research (mainly starting from Inglehart's hypothesis, presented above) we have conducted a field quantitative research, using as a research tool the questionnaire. The questionnaire was applied to a group of 186 people aged between 18-35 years. Among them, the largest share is held by people aged 18-25 years - 74.1% followed by age between 26-35 years with a percentage of 25.9%. Regarding the structure by sex, 60.7% were women and 39.3% men. To perform binary analyzes and to outline a profile of the young volunteer, our respondents were graduates of middle school, high school and university. Of their total, the highest share was held by high school graduates - 45.7% (of these total 76.8% were students), then graduates of higher education - 49.3%, and the remaining 5% were graduates of the gymnasium. Regarding the environment of residence of the respondents, 68.2% were young people from urban areas and 31.8% from rural areas.

### Results

In this part of our article we are presenting some of the main important results of our research, mainly focused on: *What means to be a volunteer? What comes in mind when they hear the term volunteering? What means to be a volunteer? What benefits can volunteer have for a person? To what extent do they think it would help them find a job?* It was very important for us to find out what is the perception of our respondents on volunteering and its benefits. One important question was having as an objective the identification of the relation between volunteering and jobs. Actually, one of the hypothesis of our study was that volunteering can help a young person to personally and

professionally develop, to achieve transversal skills - the so-called “soft skills” – which are valued a lot by employers or recruiters.

**Figure no. 1: What means to be a volunteer?**



When asked *What do you think it means to be a volunteer?*, 38.3% of respondents said that volunteering means “doing something useful”, 35.5% answered that volunteering means “doing something and waiting nothing in return”, 21.9 % believe that volunteering means “promoting human values” and 4.3% “working for little money”.

**Figure no. 2: “Volunteering”: what association with this term?**



To this question, 63.8% of the respondents answered that they associate the term volunteering with the help received, 21.3% consider that it helps them for a

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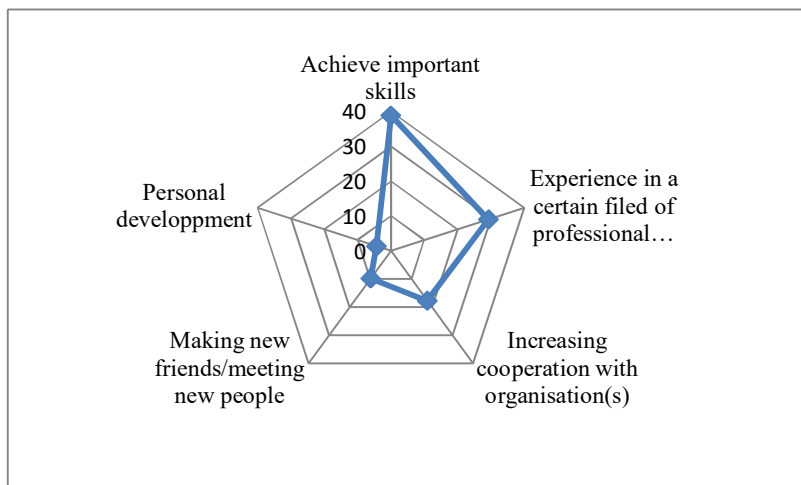
stronger CV, 8.1% associate it with “unpaid work”, a percentage of 4, 0% stated that it represents time invested and a percentage of 2.8% considers it a wasted time.

**Table no. 2: “Volunteering”: what association with this term?**  
(Bivariate analysis - by level of education)

	Lower secondary school	High school	Higher education	Total
Help	11,8%	32,7%	55,5%	100,0%
Well invested time	17,1%	35,4%	47,5%	100,0%
Unpaid work	53,5%	43,7%	2,8%	100,0%
Experience/CV	4,8%	38,5%	56,7%	100,0%
Wasted time	75,0%	25,0%	0%	100,0%

As we may observe from the table above, from higher education graduates, volunteering is associated mostly with “experience/CV” (56.7%) and “help” (55.5%). For youth whom attained level of education was high school, the term “volunteering” is associated mainly with “unpaid work” (43,7%) and “experience/CV” (38,5%). 75% of youth who indicated that volunteering represents a waste of time were young people who have attained lower secondary school. The percentages from the tables above, show us that students or university graduates are more preoccupied by helping others and by developing their career, so they are most likely involved in voluntary activities. For young people who have achieved lower education, values of survival are more important, so, most likely they are associating volunteering with unpaid work and wasted time (this could be an explanation to their low degree of involvement in volunteering activities). On the opinion of our respondents, the top 5 benefits of the volunteering are: achieve important skills (38,9%), experience in a certain domain of professional activity(29,3%), increase of cooperation with other organizations (17,7%), making new friends/meeting new people (9,8%), personal development (4,3%).

**Figure no. 3: The most important (top 5) benefits of volunteering**



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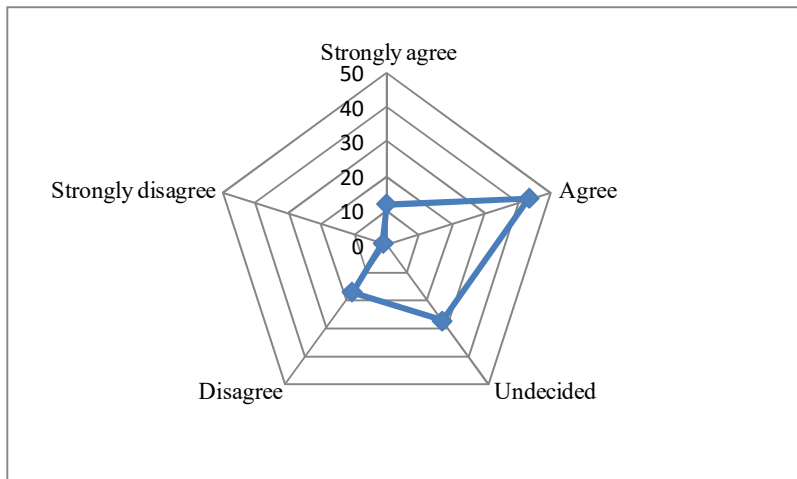
Even if there are no big differences on gender, we may observe that achieving new skills is more valued by males (55,7% indicated this response). Women (girls) are preferring to be involved in volunteering activities because they are thinking first at “personal development”, secondly at “experience in a certain filed of activity” and “making new friends or meeting new people”. The percentages, by gender analysis, are presented in the table below:

**Table no. 3: Top 5 of volunteering benefits**  
(Bivariate analysis - by gender)

	Male	Female	Total
Achieve important skills	53,7%	45,3%	100,0%
Experience in a certain field of professional activity	40,2%	59,8%	100,0%
Increasing cooperation with organization(s)	50,0%	50,0%	100,0%
Making new friends/meeting new people	47,5%	52,5%	100,0%
Personal development	20,0%	80,0%	100,0%

But one of the most important benefits of volunteering is achieving skills (mostly practical skills) that helps a person to get a job. And there are studies which are confirming the fact that “employers give more importance to practical skills in detriment of the theoretical ones acquired by students” (Nița, Ilie Goga, 2014: 114). In order to see if this situation occurred also to our respondents, we have addressed a question (with responses based on Likert scale) to youth that were having a job at the moment of our research. As we may see in the figure below, for 54,9% volunteering work helped them (“strongly agree” and “agree”) to get a job. Of course, they were also youth for whom there is no connection between volunteering and obtaining a job, most likely they are high school graduates or lower education graduates (as we may observe in the Table no 4, below)

**Figure no. 4: To what extent do you agree that volunteering helped you getting a job? \*** (\*this question was addressed only to respondents who indicated that they have a job at a filter question – “Do you have a job now? (Y/N)





**Table no. 4: To what extent do you agree that volunteering helped you getting a job?**

(Bivariate analysis - by level of education)

	Lower secondary school	High school	Higher education	Total
Strongly agree	1,0%	24,2%	74,8%	100,0%
Agree	11,0%	21,5%	67,5%	100,0%
Undecided	53,8%	22,1%	24,1%	100,0%
Disagree	50,0%	50,0%	0,0%	100,0%
Strongly disagree	82,7%	16,2%	1,1%	100,0%

Thus, from the table above we may observe that volunteering has helped a lot of higher education graduates to have a job (78,8% of higher education graduates indicated this response). In the same time, 82,7% of lower secondary graduates did not agree that volunteering helped them in getting a job. In fact, practical skills achieved through volunteering are strongly linked to the skills formed especially in universities, where teachers provide to their students “multiple skills, both professional and cross-cutting and also a great capacity to adapt to new situations” (Popescu, Stefan, 2014: 332). These percentages confirm also the fact that higher education graduates have a more positive attitude towards volunteering, than youth whom did attend only high school or lower secondary school.

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