



WORKSHOP 4: Volunteer training

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The core of volunteers' training is education in values and competence building for citizens' action – the case of Volunteer Support Centres in Italy. Renzo Razzano

The core issue in volunteer training is providing in-depth education on the identity and values of volunteering. Secondly, and only afterwards, comes the issue of facilitating relationships with stakeholders.

The acquisition of competence in deciphering the needs of beneficiaries of volunteer intervention is also of paramount importance, being linked to the ability of analysing the context and the general dynamics affecting the whole community where associations operate in order to overcome an attitude too fixed on individual needs and, therefore, unable to define an order of priorities.

This is the only acceptable basis allowing a dialogue on an equal footing with the institutions and giving a positive meaning to subsidiarity which cannot be intended as subordination, valorising the contribution of volunteering to the construction of authentic shared democracy.

In Italy, the Constitutional Reform Act of 2001 recognized the importance of 'active citizenship' by introducing the so-called "principle of horizontal subsidiarity" in article 118, par. 4, of the Italian Constitution, which establishes that: "The State, regions, metropolitan cities, provinces and municipalities shall promote the autonomous initiatives of citizens, both as individuals and as members of associations, in carrying out activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity". The constitutional reform, by recognizing that citizens can act for the common good and instructing institutions to support and encourage such efforts, confirms both that citizens have several capabilities and that they can use them to solve not just their own problems but also those that concern the community. This constitutes the general environment of the voluntary action and therefore also of the volunteers' training.

The acquisition of these competences will allow to achieve planning skills, thus overcoming the impulsiveness of the response to immediate needs, and constitute the foundation for the growth of managerial abilities.

Levels of volunteer training are manifold and require a global vision of all the matters involved.



A further issue concerns who defines the training content and who runs processes.

The Italian approach is that contents must be defined by the volunteering world and run by those strongly linked to the volunteering world. The Italian experience of Volunteer Support Centres, whose governance is in the hands of local voluntary organisations, is briefly presented here.

The Volunteer Support Centres (VSCs) were instituted by Law 266/91 Framework Law on Volunteering and its scope of activity was defined by the Ministerial Decree of 8 October 1997. They are at the service of voluntary organisations and, at the same time, managed by them, following the principle of volunteering autonomy that the Law aimed to affirm. They are active on local level, in every Italian region. In accordance to the Law, the VSCs are financed by foundations of banking origin. The Law actually states in Article 15 that such foundations must include, in their articles of association, the donation of at least one fifteenth of their yearly net revenues for the creation of special regional funds, aimed at supporting VSCs. Regional funds for VSCs are subject to control of a controlling body named *Comitato di gestione* made up of representatives of banking foundations, institutions and voluntary organisations.

Of the 78 VSCs existing in Italy, 65 are active at provincial, 9 at regional and 4 at interprovincial or sub provincial level. The vast majority of VSCs are associations of associations, predominantly registered voluntary organisations of the territory of reference. At least 13,000 third sector organisations are involved directly in the governance of the VSCs and 8,800 of these are local voluntary organisations.

VSCs aims are to:

- create the means and initiatives to stimulate the growth of solidarity, promote new voluntary initiatives and empower the existing ones;
- offer qualified counselling and support as well as instruments for the planning, set up and running of specific activities;
- organize training and qualification programmes for members of voluntary organizations;
- offer information, news, documentation and data on local and national voluntary activities.

VSCs' functions and main roles are the following:

- promotion of volunteering (meetings and conferences, promotional campaigns, organisation of public events, shows, exhibitions, publications, activities with schools and specific target groups, etc.);

II Congrés Europeu del Voluntariat

Barcelona
9, 10 i 11 de novembre de 2011



- advice and consultancy services for grass-roots voluntary organisations, including also support to groups and individuals during the constitution phase of their organisation, matching and tutoring of potential volunteers, direct support and mentoring of voluntary organisations in administration, communication, grants management and fund-raising, networking, etc.;
- training;
- information, documentation and research.

In 2007 VSCs carried out 67,045 consultancy activities, 18,541 information activities and 25,324 volunteer support activities.

As far as training is concerned VSCs are involved essentially in two types of training:

First of all they support training organised by the voluntary organisations for their volunteers, providing venues, printed materials, trainers; but also support in training planning, evaluation and needs assessment; as well as specific trainings on legislation, policy, research on recent trends, comparison with European countries. This support is in itself also a non-formal training on job and capacity building for people responsible for training of volunteers in local organisations.

Secondly, VSCs directly provide volunteers with two types of training: field-specific training (for example training for volunteers who work with cancer patients; or training for volunteers working with the bereaved, or in civil protection, etc.) or general training. Examples are training on the rules and procedures for managing a voluntary organisation; budgeting and reporting; project design and implementation; communication; conflict management; volunteer management, etc. Such general trainings are often complementary to the support VSCs provide for voluntary organisations in building the capacities and impact of networking and policy initiatives, and as necessary background for a better common representation of voluntary sector interests to public institutions.

This work represents an important investment in the third sector in Italy and a strong though undervalued contribution to life long learning.

In the year 2008-2009, 70,000 people, amounting to 45% of all VSCs users, participated in training activities. From 2006 to 2009 numbers of users have constantly been on the increase. 56% of training events were organised in cooperation with voluntary organisations. 61% of participants are volunteers of voluntary organisations, while it needs to be underlined that 14, 8% and 20,8% were respectively volunteers from other not for profit entities and would-be volunteers.