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The challenge of volunteering frequency in Croatia - can volunteers contribute to the social capital development once a year?

Volunteering is one of the strongest elements of shaping democratic change within the society. It is also an essential element in citizenship development and in re-establishing a sense of community. Volunteering empowers individuals, builds solidarity, encourages participation and protects vulnerable groups against social and economic marginalisation. The frequency and intensity of citizens' involvement through volunteering engagement is considered to be part of the social participation and one dimension of social capital measurement framework (Harper and Kelly, 2003). Volunteering has a long tradition in Croatia nevertheless due to different political, socio-cultural and economic circumstances through times, one can still question whether public perceive it as a social value and whether it is a significant contributor to the social capital.

Croatia is considerably lagging behind regarding the research of the civil sector and the other obstacle is that the academic community has still not fully recognized research of civil society sector as important one (Ledic, 2001). As a result, civil society organizations (CSOs) in Croatia have put additional efforts in the research field as a mean of enhancing its analytical capacities and responding to the key common policy issues and the urgent needs of the civil society sector. Particular emphasis was put on the development of the hands-on methodology which would enable fast, yet the constructive engagement between researchers, interviewers and practitioners and would give results that are able to contribute to both theory and the practice of further development interventions in the relevant aforementioned area.

The research presented in this paper was done during 2006 and it presents research findings of citizen's participation in the community initiatives through volunteering in 2006 in one Croatian County (Primorsko-goranska County) and compares them with those researched in the same geographical area in 2001. The main goal was to examine the facts and figures on volunteering and shed the lights on the particular problems regarding the status of volunteering in Croatia. The following dimensions were explored: general views on volunteering, attitudes to problems of volunteering in Croatia, the frequency and intensity of volunteering involvement, type of desirable activities, the nature of volunteering experience, the motivation for volunteering and suggestions for the improvement of volunteers' community status and volunteering promotion and development. A *Questionnaire on Volunteering* was created for the 2001 research and used again in 2006 with minor modifications. The questionnaire was submitted to 500 surveyed after which the data collected was processed with the SPSS statistical package. The attained conclusions have showed that the citizens in Primorsko-goranska County have generally a positive attitude towards volunteering. On the other hand the attitudes's towards volunteering in Croatia, surveyed in 2006,

were rather more negative, highlighting key obstacles such as the poor promotion in the families, misuse of volunteers and insufficient incentive measures provided by the government. During the 2005, 45,8% citizens have participated in some form of the volunteering activity in the community

initiatives and in 2000 the citizen's participation was 43,7%. When we compare the span of five years there is an evidence of a slight increase in citizen's participation in volunteering in Primorsko-goranska County. The frequency and intensity of participation in volunteering activities however has remained very low and there have even been declines reported. Out of 45,8% citizens who have been engaged in some volunteering activities, only 5% have been volunteering on daily and 18% on weekly basis, which was even lower than in 2001 research. This is considered as one of the most important findings and to examine this further more complex statistical analysis was used to point out the influential factors such as membership in association, educational level, and previous volunteering experience.

Generally there are two main benefits gained with this research. Firstly, the results contributed to the further development of the relevant synergetic action of all societal segments in the field of volunteering in Croatia and secondly the comprehensive recommendations for volunteer development in Croatia were developed and published.

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