

## SIGNIFICANCES OF VOLUNTEERING FOR THE SENIOR CITIZENS OF BRASOV (ROMANIA)

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### **Abstract**

*Considering the need of engaging elder people from Romania in formal volunteering activities, we tried to understand what volunteering means for the senior citizens of Brasov and to gather valuable information for further strategies to recruit and to retain elders in volunteering activities. We found out what is volunteering for our participants, what are the type of volunteering in their view, who volunteers and why, for whom do people volunteer, what volunteering activity would they like to do, why don't they volunteer and how could elders be convinced to volunteer in their opinion. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis was performed. By gathering qualitative data, the study managed to capture in depth elements concerning the significances that elders associate to volunteering and to complete the existing statistical data about this topic.*

**Keywords:** *volunteer activities, elderly people, non-governmental organizations.*

## Introduction

Volunteering is a highly topical issue in our country. It is of great interest, in general, to those working in the non-profit sector, particularly to NGOs who engage in the social field. Moreover, volunteering can be defined as a current social issue, but not in the traditional sense, that of factor, process or social state, which has a negative impact on the development of society, but rather as defined by C. Zamfir & L. Stoica (2006, p. 7), according to whom a social issue can also represent „a positive state”, such as the emergence of „opportunities for development”.

The majority of Romanian NGOs rely on the financial support of foreign sponsors. However, this support is limited and even insufficient at times. Apart from this support, organizations can also resort to at least two other financing options. The first one is self-financing and the second one (attracting and engaging volunteers in the organization's activities), which complements first, can solve both the problem of financial resources and that of human resources.

Volunteering is of interest not only for organizational reasons, but also for personal ones. Numerous studies (Greig et al., 1994, Perrig-Chiello et al., 1998, Wilson & Musick, 2000) have proven that volunteering can have multiple benefits for the physical and mental health of those who participate in such activities regularly.

And while young Romanians are currently engaging in various volunteering activities, volunteering amongst elderly people represents a challenge, both for them and for the organizations in which they could become involved.

Statistical data (McCloughan et al., 2011, p. 16) confirms the low involvement of elderly people (over 65 years of age) in volunteering activities, throughout Eastern Europe and implicitly in Romania. Only 0,9% of the elderly population from countries such as Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania take part in volunteering activities several times a week and only 1,5% do so once or twice a week, while the European average is of 3,9%, and 7,1% respectively. M. Voicu & B. Voicu (2003, p. 147) claim that the low involvement of Romanians over 65 years of age in volunteering activities may be due to the fact that „this type of activity is relatively new in Romania and could have a stronger impact on young people, who are more open to change”.

We tried to discover what are the meanings attributed by elders to volunteering and to widen current statistical data about elders' volunteering by collecting, analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. We believed that by using them, not only will we understand what volunteering means for the senior citizens of Brasov, but that we would also be able to further develop strategies to recruit, select and retain elders in volunteering activities based on them. Thus, we tried to find out what is volunteering for the senior citizens of Brasov, what are the type of volunteering in their view, who volunteers and why, for whom do people volunteer, what volunteering activity would they like to do, why don't they volunteer and how could elders be convinced to volunteer in their opinion.

In Romania there are no qualitative studies regarding volunteering at the third age. Internationally, the studies about elderly peoples' volunteering focus on the benefits as-

sociated with this activity. There are few qualitative researches regarding the topic of the elders' volunteering. For example, L. Pavelek (2013) interviewed senior volunteers from Slovak republic about their motives for volunteering and L. K. Chen (2016) used self-defined successful aging concept of seniors (scrutinized through in-depth interviews) to explore the roles of learning through volunteering in Taiwan. But there is no qualitative research focused on the meaning of the volunteering concept for senior citizens.

## 1. Theoretical aspects

### 1. 1. Definitions of the concept of volunteering

In The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (1998, p. 1169) there are two definitions of the noun *volunteer*. In the first one, the word preserves its original meaning from French, referring to a person who joins the army to serve his/her military service of free will. The second definition is less specific with respect to the area or type of action, referring to "a person who renders a service willingly and disinterestedly". This second description is highly general, making it impossible to establish if it refers to volunteering and not to an action made by a person in an emergency situation, for instance. Another equally general definition is that provided by I. Scheier (2000, p. 27): "any service rendered relatively without constraint by a person with the intent of helping and without pursuing an immediate financial gain".

In the definitions of volunteering, the possibility of gain or reward as a result of providing such a service is illustrated differently. Therefore, Ch. Tilly & Ch. Tilly (as cited in Voicu & Voicu, 2010, p. 144) conceptualize volunteering as being an *uncommodified* activity, while other authors, such as J. F. Dovidio (1984), N. Eisenberg & R. A. Fabes (as cited in Aronson et al., 2007) *don't exclude* the possibility of the existence of such *benefits*. The latter believe that there are several ways in which a pro-social behavior can be rewarded. According to the norm of reciprocity, by helping we can increase our chances of being helped. The provided support may represent an investment for the future – one day, someone will help us when we will be in need. Moreover, we will feel more comfortable and we will eliminate the spectator's specific feeling of guilt.

So, while some descriptions of volunteering exclude any *material compensation* in exchange for the help provided, others mention the situations in which a volunteer could be paid (e.g. the reimbursement of all expenses).

Another much more explicit definition is that adopted by the UK National Volunteering Forum in 1996, according to which volunteering is „a commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and community and could take many forms. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain” (Kearney, 2001/2007, p. 6).

Unlike the above-mentioned definitions of *volunteering*, the definition quoted by Kearney emphasizes two aspects which are specific for this type of activity. The first aspect refers to the *costs* associated to volunteering, which each person involved in such an activity must undertake (time and energy, which could come in different forms).

The other aspect refers to the *purpose* of volunteering. While in the previous descriptions it is expressed rather generally, such as „for the benefit of others”, „with the intent to help”, this last definition manages to restrict the area of volunteering to those activities which are conducted for the benefit of society and community.

This last aspect is also present in the definition of the term „volunteering” from Law no. 78/2014 regarding the regulation of volunteering activities in Romania. According to this law, volunteering is an activity of *public interest* which implies “the participation of the volunteer in activities of public interest *undertaken in the benefit of other people or of society*, organized by public or private legal entities, without remuneration, individually or in a group”.

Therefore, one cannot help but note that the term *volunteering* is used with a variety of meanings and different connotations. This idea is also supported by R. Cnaan & L. Amroffell (1994) who state that there is no generally accepted definition of *volunteering*, to clearly set the limits of this type of activity.

## 1. 2. Types of volunteering

D. H. Smith (as cited in Rochester, Paine, Howlett & Zimmek, 2010, p. 24) considers that despite the variety of ways in which volunteering can manifest itself and the differences existing in this respect between the various regions of the world, in a global perspective, volunteering activities can take four different forms, depending on the immediate purpose or the targeted finality: reciprocal help or mutual assistance, philanthropy and services rendered to others, taking part in the political life, promotional/awareness campaigns.

Another perspective on volunteering types was developed by R. Inglehart (2003, p. 63-68); in his vision, the focus being civic participation (regardless if you’re a member of an association or a volunteer within that association). He distinguishes three main categories of volunteering activities: a) volunteering activities conducted by various associations who support environmental protection, the welfare of elderly or disabled people, healthcare associations or those interested in the development of poor countries and human rights, b) volunteering activities which imply the involvement in political parties, local organizations preoccupied by the issue of poverty or unemployment, in women’s associations and in syndicates, c) volunteering within religious, cultural, sports, professional or educational associations.

In an attempt to illustrate as extensively as possible the types of volunteering C. Rochester et al. (2010, p. 27-29) present a list of volunteering activities conceived by the United Nations Volunteers program in 2001 which includes: community activity, emergency situations, maintaining peace in the community, social assistance, personal assistance, children and teenagers, human rights, economic justice, religious volunteering, education, health, data collection, information/knowledge promotion, commerce/food promotion, judicial services, culture, recreation/leisure.

D. Șăulean (2001, p. 40) identifies a number of 12 domains (culture and art, sports and recreation, education and research, health, medical services, environmental protection, social and economic development, human rights and the promotion of civic

spirit, philanthropy and volunteering, religion, international cooperation, representing business and professional interests), and M. Voicu & B. Voicu (2010, p. 149) mention a number of 14 types of organizations in which volunteers could activate, including political parties and syndicates. It is worth mentioning that some of the domains mentioned by Romanian studies represent combinations of two of the types of activities presented by C. Rochester et al. (2010).

Based on the way in which volunteers see the activities they are taking part in, R. A. Strebbs (2007, 2015) identifies three types of volunteering. The first is *volunteering as a serious leisure*, a systematic activity, interesting enough, substantial and which meets expectations, activity which implies the acquisition and expression of a combination of skills, knowledge and experiences. The second type is *volunteering as a casual leisure*. In this case the activities are immediate, pleasant, full of intrinsic satisfactions and take place over short periods of time, the volunteers needing little to no previous preparation. The third type is *project-based leisure* which corresponds in the typology created by N. Macduff (2005, p. 50) to interim volunteering (volunteering on a regular basis but for a defined period, for example on a project). This implies offering help over a limited amount of time (while the project lasts), involvement in occasional and creative activities.

The last classification of volunteering activities that we will present takes into consideration the criterion of the *context* in which these activities take place, distinguishing two types of volunteering: formal volunteering and informal volunteering.

*Informal volunteering* can be defined as an “unpaid work carried out directly in favor of someone outside one’s home such as helping a neighbor” (Fiorillo & Nappo, 2015), as the free activity through which one offers help to those around him/her (other than his/her relatives), outside a formal context, such as, for instance, an institution. P. B. Reed & K. L. Selbee (2000, p. 3) define informal volunteering as being “any form of direct help or assistance provided outside of their own household and outside a formal organization”. The main characteristics of this type of volunteering are presented by J. Wilson (as cited in Tienen et al., 2010) as being: *spontaneity* – the help offered is a spontaneous one, with no previous preparation and *the private environment* in which it takes place.

In opposition, *formal volunteering* “entails structured service offered to an organization, often within the public domain” (Shandra, 2017, p. 2) and is defined as “any contribution in unpaid time to the activities of formal organizations” (Selbee, 2000, p. 3) or as “unpaid work that benefits others to whom one owes no obligation via an organization that supports volunteering in health and social care” (Morris, Payne, Ockenden & Hill, 2017).

### 1. 3. Benefits of volunteering

T. W. McDonald, E. L. Chown, J. E. Tabb, A. K. Schaeffer & E. K. M. Howard (2013) suggests that senior citizens often face challenges related to deteriorating physical and mental health, and the quality of their lives may suffer as a result and also suggests that volunteering can improve the health (see also Tomioka, Kurumatani & Hosoi, 2017; O’Reilly, Rosato, Moriarty & Leavey, 2017) and quality of life for seniors.

Formal or informal volunteering has many benefits. C. L. Shandra (2017, p. 1) shows that the volunteering is “positively associated with happiness, life-satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being” (see also Piliavin & Siegl, 2007; Grimm et al., 2007; Thoits and Hewitt, 2001).

Also J. Wilson & M. Musick (2000) reviewed some of the researches on supposed benefits of volunteering and concluded that, for the volunteers, there are five major benefits which they can experience by getting involved in unpaid activities: physical health, mental health, occupational achievement, diminished chances to engage in anti-social behavior and development of civism. Considering the specific character of our study, we shall only present the physical and mental health benefits of volunteering.

Recent progress in medical sociology has drawn attention to the benefits which volunteering activities can have over **physical health**, social integration and social support. By helping others, people may develop social networks to help them reduce stress and disease risk. Moreover, “the altruistic features of volunteerism might reduce destructive levels of self-absorption or obesity risk” (Oman, Thoresen & McMahon, 1999). Rogers (as cited in Wilson & Musick, 2000) shows that volunteers have a more reduced mortality rate than non-volunteers, regardless of their participation level in church activities, age, marital status, education or gender. A recent report also suggests that engaging in a greater variety of leisure activities, regardless of how cognitively challenging they are, is associated with a reduced risk of memory impairment (Anderson et al., 2014).

Moreover, J. Wilson & M. Musick (2000); O’Reilly et al., (2017) consider that there are reasons based on which we can conclude that volunteering has positive effects on **mental health**. First of all, volunteering is a type of social activity or social participation. It is a well-known fact that social integration (defined as the number/quantity of social relations) of a person has positive effects over mental health, while social isolation (solitude) results in depression. Therefore, volunteering, as a type of social participation facilitates the development of social relations, offering the possibility to meet and relate to new people and diminishing the chances of being affected by depression or by other negative mental states. Also, the researchers have shown that “motivating retired seniors to engage in voluntary work on a continuous basis would help to improve their cognitive health” (Griep, Hanson, Vantilborgh, Janssens, Jones & Hyde, 2017).

## 2. Methodological aspects

The study presented in this article is part of a wider research project: ***The problematic of elders and volunteering in the community of Brasov***, financed by Brasov County Council and implemented by a team of sociologists from Transylvania University, The Faculty of Sociology and Communication. In this larger project we collected data through questionnaires and interviews and we also performed a secondary data analysis.

The results presented in this article only refer to the meaning elders attribute to volunteering. We tried to find out what is volunteering for the senior citizens of Braşov, what are the type of volunteering in their view, who volunteers and why, for whom do

people volunteer, what volunteering activity would they like to do, why don't they volunteer and how could elders be convinced to volunteer in their opinion.

The ultimate goal of our study and of our wide project (in the Romanian context of population aging, of limited human resources in the social field and of early retirement) is for senior citizens, for host organizations and for the community as a whole, to benefit from the advantages generated by the involvement of elders as volunteers. This is why we tried to understand the meaning of the volunteering for the senior citizens living in one of the biggest towns in Romania.

The data we worked with were qualitative data collected by the means of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted by students. They started with a narrative question: *We are working on a project for school and we are trying to find out what ordinary people think about volunteering. I'd like to talk to you a little about this topic. What do you think volunteering is? We're not looking for sophisticated definitions. We just want to know what volunteering means to you. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in anything you can tell us about this topic.* The participants were encouraged to speak freely but some clarification questions were also asked. Some questions were also prepared for the cases when participants wouldn't mention certain aspects:

- To make sure I understand, could you please give some examples of volunteering? What could we call volunteering?

- If you were to look back, are there any situations when you might say you volunteered? Or can you give me an example of someone you know who volunteers or who volunteered? Please tell me what kind of volunteering activity it was.

- Please describe a person who volunteers. How do you think this person is? Who are the people who volunteer?

- Why do you think someone would volunteer?

- Who do you think most needs to benefit from someone's volunteering? For the benefit of whom do you think it is worth to volunteer?

- Let's assume your task would be to promote volunteering among healthy people over 60. Through what activities and how do you think you could attract them?

22 women and men over 60, residing in Brasov, were interviewed. The sampling was theoretical. We tried to interview people with different socio-economic statuses (like income or education), elders with or without children and grandchildren, with a good or a poor health condition etc. We couldn't find any significant differences between their responses and we stopped interviewing when we reached saturation on gender and age sampling criteria.

We performed a thematic analysis on the answers provided by our interviewees. The data was classified using emerging themes. The NVivo 10 software was used for data processing and analysis.

The research was performed respecting the social research ethics. The participants were informed about the research goals and about their rights to withdraw at any moment. They gave us the permission to record the interviews and to store them in secure conditions. We assured the confidentiality of the participants.

In the next chapter we shall present the results obtained. Because we couldn't find any other qualitative research dealing with our topic, we discuss our findings by comparing them with available statistical data.

### 3. Findings and discussions

#### 3.1. What is volunteering in the opinion of the elders of Brasov?

Every interviewee was able to provide an answer to this question. It seems to be a subject that, even though not among their serious preoccupations, they heard and know some things about. Even those who say that they don't really know what it implies, have heard the term in one context or another: *I've read about these activities in the paper, but I don't really know what they do; I don't really know what volunteering is, I've heard about it on TV, but didn't pay much attention.*

The three main components of volunteering, as seen by the participants are:

- **the absence of material benefits** or of any other nature as a result of taking part in a volunteering activity: *we exclude any kind of remuneration, any kind of gift or ulterior counter-service; for which you are not directly rewarded; without getting anything in return; without receiving anything; without asking for anything in return.* This dimension which appears in the definition of volunteering provided by most of the participants seems to be the main and most important characteristic of volunteering.

- the purpose of volunteering activities is **offering one's help**: *to offer help; an activity of helping others; when you help people; when you do something to help.* "Helping", in its different grammatical forms, is the word which appears most often when the interviewees talk about volunteering.

- there is no volunteering in the absence of others; volunteering is **for someone**: *for the community; for society; you do it for others; for people; for someone else; an action someone does for someone else; for the benefit of someone.*

Therefore, most of the definitions of volunteering provided by elders include these three aspects: *helping someone without asking for anything in return; free work done for others; work done for someone, help given to someone without asking for any financial rewards or of any other nature in return; helping someone completely disinterestedly.*

Another important component of volunteering also appears: the **non-mandatory** character of volunteering activities. It's volunteering only if it's done willingly, not forced in any way: *an unsolicited activity; without being asked; it's when you help people without having to; an activity in which you get involved willingly; it's something you do because you want to; who volunteers does it because he/she feels so, nobody is forcing him/her.*

This component is important for our participants who lived most of their life under the communist regime. There was a sort of community service back then, which was not paid, but mandatory. There are many participants who confuse volunteering with this „patriotic work”:



- back in the old regime, we volunteered at...from work they would take us to build flats, we dug ditches, we carried the materials and planted the green spaces, we planted flowers and trees;

- *back in the old days we would go to pick up wheat ears, then at the harvester so nothing would be wasted, we would go weeding because we didn't have herbicides and we went because we did it for our community, for our commune, for all the people in the village;*

- *in spring we would work in the factory garden, we had a small garden there; or when we painted or did something, everybody had to: after work you had to stay, clean a window, do what you could.*

We think that the way in which many participants perceive volunteering is distorted because of these mandatory "volunteering" activities from their youth. It is possible for this distortion to produce effects in participants' behaviors; it could determine reserve towards current specific volunteering activities.

The main characteristics of volunteering, as described by the participants, can also be found in the definition of volunteering, present in the current Romanian legislation. The non-mandatory character of volunteering activities is also emphasized by the literature in the field (see Scheier, 2000). See also Chelcea (2008) who mentions the fact that any pro-social behavior (volunteering therefore included) has the following characteristics: it is intentional and conscious, it is disinterested, aims to help, protect and support the people around us and is conducted independently from one's professional or formal duties.

### 3. 2. How are volunteering activities evaluated by the elders of Brasov?

Volunteering generally receives a **positive evaluation**; there are few who consider it to be a „waste of time”. But we believe that this evaluation is a result of the fact that it is socially desirable to appreciate volunteering. Besides the fact that it is *a noble action, a good deed*, volunteering is perceived as being necessary to any society and to any human being: *I consider volunteering to be necessary for society, as many people as possible should participate; it's useful and helps both others and yourself*. Despite all this there are interviewees who confess that they avoid telling others that they are volunteers; they have the feeling that volunteering is not something to boast about, that you're rather mocked than appreciated when you're involved in volunteering activities: *I'm ashamed to tell people that I'm going to volunteer: those who volunteer, some people mock them if you've noticed: „ha, ha, ha, look at him, he works for nothing...”*.

There seems to be a discrepancy between the attitude towards volunteering (which is mostly favorable) and participation in volunteering activities (which is reduced among elders) – the favorable attitude doesn't seem to determine specific volunteering behavior. There also seems to be a discrepancy between the attitude towards volunteering and that towards volunteers.

We believe that these discrepancies are caused by the characteristics of volunteering in Romania. The context and history of volunteering in Europe varies from one country to another. While certain European states have a long tradition of volunteering activities and a well-developed volunteering sector (Ireland, The Netherlands, the UK), in other countries volunteering is still developing or weakly developed (Bulgaria, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania).

Volunteering is strongly influenced by the historical, political and cultural context of countries. Research shows that countries with a higher degree of economic development and a higher labor productivity rate, as well as the ones with a democratic political and institutional tradition are more probable to have a strong civil society and a higher number of non – profit organizations (SPES 2008, as cited in CE, 2010).

That explains why in western and northern European countries a higher percentage of the population participates in volunteering activities than in Central and Eastern Europe. A major factor which explains the weak participation of citizens in volunteering activities in ex-communist countries is the communist heritage. With slight variations, in ex-communist countries there is a negative attitude among citizens towards volunteering, which they strongly associate, as our study has also shown, with the mandatory volunteering activities from that time, in organizations controlled by the state. As a result, in an attempt to regain control over their own spare time, people refuse to participate in any volunteering activities.

Moreover, the communist heritage also explains the reduced participation in volunteering activities within social services organizations, because most people who lived during the communist regime think that it is the state's responsibility to solve social issues, it is a task that belongs to the state, not to its citizens (CE, 2010).

Considering the fact that communist Europe didn't have an independent civil society for almost half a century, research conducted in this area suggested that the civil society in these countries is still strongly affected by the limited participation of citizens to community life and by a civic disillusion while civil organizations mostly focus on fundraising, thus raising questions about the long-term financial sustainability of their activities (Fioramonti & Finn Heinrich, 2007, p. 6).

### 3. 3. Who are those who volunteer in the opinion of the elders of Brasov?

It is possible for the above-mentioned discrepancies to also be determined by the belief that the majority of participants had that **young people are the ones who volunteer**. Elders think that volunteering is an activity that is specific to young age: *it's for young people; a work young people do; volunteering is a good thing nowadays especially for young people because it teaches them to be more responsible; volunteering means the help young people offer to elders*. Maybe this is the reason why they don't volunteer, and if they do, they have the feeling that others think little of them because of this.

In interviews, when we asked for a portrait of the volunteer, other elements which are specific to volunteers appeared. The most frequently encountered are **accentuated**

**religiousness:** *people who believe in God; as far as I've seen women are the ones who volunteer more because they are more religious; only if they're very religious people; and going through some **traumatic life experiences:** I think many of them suffered or went through such things and now they want... to help others because they didn't have a good fate; who never had someone in the family who was mentally ill or had cancer or was disabled can't understand.* Of course they also have to be **selfless, kind-hearted**, but elders think that although there are people who are simply *kind*, there are also many young volunteers who participate in certain activities because of **personal interest** (most of the time this interest is to acquire professional experience); *young people who get involved in these volunteering activities will gain the necessary experience and find a job faster; there are also many students who during university volunteer to gain experience in the field they are specializing in; it's a good start to be able to really get a good job.*

This interest identified in the volunteering activities of young people contradicts the definition of volunteering provided by most participants. It seems difficult to conceive the existence of people who simply want to help, without receiving anything in return.

If we were to compare the beliefs of elders with the statistics, we would notice that they are quite similar. In ex-communist countries (Latvia, Poland, Romania, Hungary, etc.) there is a much lower percentage of people participating in volunteering activities in general, and of people over 50 in particular. In Hungary 16,6% of the population aged 51 to 60 participates in volunteering activities and just 9,5% of those aged 61 to 70 do the same (KSH, 2001/2002, as cited in Ehlers et al., 2011). In Romania only 12,8% of the adult population volunteers (Study of Volunteering in the European Union, 2010).

In the case of these countries, young people, especially those with higher education, are the ones who volunteer. The elders are focused on family, offering support to their children and generally focusing on raising their grandchildren.

When analyzing volunteers from the point of view of age, most European states tend to fall into one of the three categories below:

- a. most of the volunteers are aged 15 to 30 (Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic (75%), Romania, Poland, Slovakia (70%), Slovenia, Spain).
- b. most of the volunteers are aged 30 to 50 (Belgium, Hungary, Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Sweden).
- c. volunteers of all ages get involved (Austria, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, the UK).

According to a study conducted in Ireland, 15% of the population over 50 participates in volunteering activities at least once a week, 11% at least once a month, 16% once a year and 58% never took part in such activities. Those aged 65 to 74 are more willing to volunteer as compared to those aged 50 to 64 or over 74 (Timonen et al., 2010). In the Netherlands elders volunteer more than any other age group (one out of three people aged 55 to 75 volunteers). In Great Britain 78% of the population over 50 is regularly involved in volunteering activities (28% of volunteers are aged 50 to 64, 30% are aged 65 to 74 and 20% are over 75).

In most European countries the number of male volunteers is higher than that of female volunteers (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg,

Hungary, Portugal, Sweden, Slovenia). The dominance of male volunteers can be explained by the fact that sports organizations/activities attract more men than women. At the same time, women are significantly more involved in social and health activities. Men also make up the majority in rescue operations. The dominance of men in volunteering can also be explained by the fact that in some countries women prefer to get involved in activities considered to be part of informal volunteering (activities with family, friends or neighbors).

In a considerable number of states such as: Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Poland, Romania there are no significant differences in the number of men and women involved in volunteering activities and in countries such as Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Malta, Northern Ireland, England, Scotland the number of female volunteers is significantly higher than that of male volunteers (Bulgaria - 69%).

Although gender differences are insignificant among elderly volunteers, there are more women involved in such activities than men (Timonen et al., 2010). The findings also apply to the case of UK volunteers: 28% of women are involved in volunteering activities as compared to 23% of men (Drever, 2010).

Scholars suggest that married, more educated individuals are more likely to get involved in volunteering activities than single, less educated ones (Morrow-Howell, 2010, Haski-Leventhal, 2009, Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). The positive correlation between education and the participation in volunteering activities is also illustrated by a report analyzing the situation of 20 European states, including Romania (Bulgaria – 56% of volunteers have a higher education, Denmark - 34%, Germany - 43%, Romania - 56% of volunteers have a high school, postgraduate or university education).

Our findings can complete these statistics. The statistics contain an inventory of the classical socio-demographic variables: gender, age, level of education, etc. but fail to include more personal aspects which we believe might better characterize volunteers. Referrals to religiousness or traumatic life experiences are variables that are highly likely to determine volunteering activities (maybe they have a much stronger association with volunteering than the socio-demographics).

### 3. 4. Why do people volunteer in the opinion of the elders of Brasov?

The most frequent answer to the question why would someone volunteer is **spiritual fulfilment**. According to elders, those who volunteer do it for the peace of mind helping others gives you: *food for the soul; you feel satisfied that you helped someone; that spiritual fulfilment that you managed to help, you managed to do something; a spiritual fulfilment that you can't buy with anything else; I guess it's about a spiritual fulfilment, it's a spiritual implication and the satisfaction is also spiritual.*

This state of fulfilment is sometimes associated with a sort of **religious achievement**, a divine reward: *to earn my place in heaven; I'm happy to help those in need because God also helps me; so they think about Easter and Christmas, it's Lent, I'll go to church for confession so I know that I did and my conscience is clear.*

Those who are or were volunteers also think about the motivation provided by the opportunity to **socialize**: *I enjoy socializing very much, very, very much; we can get energized from one another, we talk, we share opinions about this and that, we get a little more involved, we talk; I'll do anything to get away from home and come here to socialize.*

Given the identified motivations (specific especially to third age), the small number of elders who participate in volunteering activities is strange. What is also strange, if these are the motivations, is why it is considered that volunteering is specific to young people.

In the case of those who volunteer the motivation of **learning** also appears. Most of those who volunteer admit that they have learned a lot either from volunteer training courses, from the activities conducted or from talking to other volunteers: *there are many people who want to learn something and through volunteering you learn the right things; it's not volunteering until you learn something; I've learned and know a lot of things since I started to come here, a lot; those who are involved in volunteering activities develop numerous abilities such as solidarity, civic spirit, trust, tolerance, social responsibility, volunteering nowadays has extraordinary educational capacities because it's a form of practical learning.* It's a proper environment for self-development, even for elders.

Other studies made on volunteers regarding why they volunteer brought to light slightly different answers (probably due to the fact that they came from younger people). Many volunteers also consider that volunteering represents *the opportunity to acquire new abilities* and use the ones they already have. Many national reports mention that the abilities acquired by volunteers during volunteering activities can often be transferred and used in other personal or professional contexts.

Moreover, volunteers consider that acquiring new knowledge and skills during volunteering activities and the experience they accumulate *increase their chances of finding a job*. Countries such as the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Spain, Sweden and the UK support the importance of involving teenagers in volunteering activities in order to later integrate them in the labor market. These opinions regarding increasing chances of hiring teenagers who participated in volunteering activities is supported by the data provided by the European Volunteering Center (2009) according to which  $\frac{3}{4}$  of employers prefer to hire people who were involved as volunteers in various projects and/or organizations.

In countries such as The Netherlands, France, Romania, Poland, Spain, Sweden and the UK volunteering is seen as an opportunity to *acquire experience in the field you are specializing in*. In this case, volunteers can see what their future profession implies, what the professional opportunities and challenges are, if they are compatible with their choice or not. Moreover, volunteering offers them the possibility to learn new things about their profession, which were not taught in school, in a formal educational context (e.g. in Spain). For Swedish students volunteering represents a highly pragmatic complementary activity which takes place in a *real* context and comes in completion of their theoretical studies.

These aspects related to professional benefits acquired through the involvement in volunteering activities is also recognized by our participants when talking about young people – as those who participate in volunteering activities most rather due to professional motivation.

In Denmark, the Czech Republic, France, Germany and the Netherlands volunteering can facilitate *social integration of underprivileged people*. In France, for instance, the participation to volunteering activities of people looking for a job can increase their chances of integrating themselves into different groups, interacting constructively with other members of the community and might enable them to find new employment opportunities.

For most people volunteering provides a *feeling of usefulness*. This feeling is often related to people's wish to engage in volunteering activities through which they help others. This meaning of volunteering can be found in countries such as: Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Romania, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Malta and the UK. The feeling of usefulness encourages volunteers to continue doing this type of activity on the long term.

Volunteering may represent for many *a way of meeting new people*, of making new friends and creating a social network. This way, the chances of becoming an isolated or socially marginalized person decrease dramatically. Meeting new different people, who come from different environments and have a different past, can help promote tolerance and understanding between people. In Italy for instance, volunteering is seen as an opportunity for elders (29% of active volunteers in 2003) to socialize and to continue to be useful for the community. In Romania, a study conducted by C. Rigman (2008) shows that 49,4% of volunteers declared that through volunteering they had the opportunity to make new friends. Another 41% of Romanian volunteers declared that they had the opportunity to *implement new ideas* through volunteering activities through which they helped local authorities to find efficient solutions to community problems.

Volunteering is also seen as a way to get to *(better) know the problems* which exist in certain domains (e.g. the health system) or that certain groups have (e.g. disabled people).

The results of our study reveal the existence of motivations which are specific to elders. Previous studies don't describe motivations referring to spiritual satisfaction or religious fulfilment. It is possible for these motivating factors to be exploited when promoting volunteering among people over 60.

### 3. 5. For whom do people volunteer in the opinion of the elders of Brasov?

Most referrals to the beneficiaries of volunteering activities are quite vague: *those in need, helpless people, those who have problems, facing difficult situations, who have no help*. The most frequently mentioned categories are **elders** (alone, sick or unable to move) and **children** (orphans). The poor and the disabled are also mentioned.

The organized forms of help the participants are familiar with, where they could volunteer are *placement centers, orphanages, retirement homes, hospitals*. The answers are extremely vague, without any direct referral to certain centers. Only those activating as volunteers give precise answers. The institutions mentioned were *Hospice, Christiana, Red Cross and Copiii de cristal*.

For whom do people volunteer, where and what volunteering consists of seems to be quite unclear for our participants. This can be explained on one hand by the fact that the elderly are not interested in participating in volunteering activities within the various organizations from the community and therefore are unfamiliar with them, and on the other hand by the fact that institutions are not visible enough among elders, either because they don't organize enough campaigns, or because these campaigns are conducted through means (facebook, web pages, etc.) which do not reach those over 60-65.

### 3. 6. What are the types of volunteering in the opinion of the elders of Brasov?

The most frequently encountered type of volunteering in the speeches of our participants is not the institutionally organized one but the one we could call **mutual assistance**. There are numerous examples of situations in which people help other people in need; there are usually naturally occurring situations such as helping children, nephews, neighbors, friends or acquaintances; walks in the park or giving advice are also considered help.

- *I help out neighbors, I check their blood pressure, their blood sugar, you can help old people who are alone, you can check up on them once or twice each week or each month to ask them if they need anything, help them go to the doctor, help them around the house;*
- *children and people of different ages who are very sick; you can go talk to them, encourage them, get their spirits up, make it easier for them to go through their troubles;*
- *I volunteer at my daughter's because she has three small children;*
- *well I did, I helped, people, friends, neighbors who...went down the wrong path, and I talked to them and in time they understood and went back to normal.*

This unorganized type of volunteering seems to be the one that elders are open to. They are ready to help and many of them do, and if you were to ask them to volunteer, this type of services would be what they would prefer. It seems to matter a lot for them if they know the beneficiary of their volunteering or not (the more they know the beneficiary, the more they are willing to help).

With respect to the typologies of volunteering, these seem to refer to the criterion of institutionalization (elders prefer non - institutionalized help) and that of the beneficiary of the help offered (most elders would directly help the people in need). Besides the help offered to people they know, participants also mentioned the environment. They recognize **greening** as a type of volunteering: *activities which support natural protection works, tending trees and stands; setting up flower rounds and cleaning in front of our flat; collecting garbage from parks; the maintenance of mountain tracks*. Most of the time, this support is also offered to areas which are physically nearby or which they frequent (the green area near their flat, the parks where they usually go for walks, the mountain tracks they climb on etc.).

Another criterion refers to the form that the help provided takes (elders prefer rendering services – most referring to housework or leisure; another dominant is the wish to satisfy the need of socializing and counselling). Participants also mention **financial aid**

(but most of the time also mention that they cannot offer such an aid); *I go to the drugstore, buy an aspirin, I see that box but I honestly can't afford to put that 1 leu in it, that's half a bread for me; I could help even with a small amount of money; I'd donate.*

We can therefore conclude that elders prefer to engage in informal volunteering activities (Reed & Selbee, 2000) which take place outside their household, but in a private environment (Tienen et al., 2010) rather than in an organized, formal one.

According to the Romanian legislation in force, most of the activities our participants engage in can't even be considered volunteering, as volunteering is *an activity of public interest*, and the domains in which public interest activities can take place are: „art and culture, sports and recreation, education and research, environmental protection, social assistance, religion, civic activism, human rights, humanitarian and/or philanthropic aid, communitarian development, social development”. The help offered to a neighbor, friend or relative, even for a longer period of time therefore cannot be considered volunteering because the action takes place in an informal, private environment.

### 3. 7. Why don't the participants volunteer?

Some of the elders don't seem willing to volunteer. Their main reasons are **advanced age** (*I'm way too advanced in age to help the community; because of my age I wouldn't get involved and couldn't sacrifice for anybody; unfortunately at my age I can't take part in such things*) and **health conditions** (*because of my health I don't really have the possibility to help; my health won't allow it, I'd be more of a burden; if I were healthier I'd love to; If I could physically be up for the task I would go*). However, despite the fact that all the participants are over 60, there aren't many who give these reasons.

It is possible that except the ones with serious health conditions and the most elderly, it might be very difficult for elders to refuse volunteering activities. There are participants who also say that they **don't have time** (most of them take care of their grandchildren), other that, in general **Romanians lack the education** regarding volunteering or that **Romanians are very poor** and can't afford working without receiving any compensation. But most of the participants declare that they would be willing to volunteer, which can represent an important premise to start from in building a strategy to increase the degree of involvement of elders in the life of the community.

The availability shown by our interviewees comes in contradiction with the weak actual involvement of elders in volunteering activities; this fact could be explained through the lack of a volunteering culture, not only at an individual level but also at an institutional one, manifested through a reticence of organizations to involve elders in their activities. These rather prefer involving teenagers, who are considered much more open to change and challenges and more willing to get involved.

### 3. 8. What volunteering activities would the elders of Brasov like to do?

The activities they suggest are activities that elders usually do. Most of them think they could volunteer to do different house chores: cooking, cleaning, taking care of chil-



dren; others suggest movement – related activities: doing the grocery shopping for those who cannot leave the house and helping them move around; others want to get involved in leisure activities, gardening, walking, visiting museums, reading, crocheting; others offer themselves to keep company to elders, socialize or would like to look after children in the park or at camp; many believe that they could help by giving advice, offering guidance, moral support. These rather seem to be activities they are lacking, that they need more than others do.

They'd also be willing to help with greening or make different objects to sell in order to raise funds: make beads, straw hats, baskets.

Of course, there are gender-based differences in the volunteering activities suggested. Women mostly suggest daily house chores: cooking, cleaning, etc., while men mostly suggest outdoors activities: going shopping, gardening, etc.

If we were to compare volunteering activities which the elders of Brasov could easily do and enjoy with the volunteering activities from Europe and Romania, we wouldn't notice any major differences. The findings of a report (CE, 2010, p. 78-80) on volunteering in the European Union (in which 24 states took part) shows that the domains in which volunteering activities usually take place in general are:

- d. sports (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany etc.)
- e. social services and health (Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Slovakia, Slovenia etc.)
- f. religious organizations (Romania, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia etc.)
- g. culture (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden etc.)
- h. leisure (Denmark, France, Germany, Luxemburg, Malta, Slovakia)
- i. education/training and research (Estonia, Germany, The Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia and the UK)

The same study also shows that volunteers usually engage in the following types of activities: administrative tasks, working directly with people, preparing and organizing volunteering activities, management tasks, fundraising campaigns/lobby and event organizing.

Elderly Irish volunteers have reported participating in a variety of activities, the most popular being: event organizing (38,4%), giving advice (30,5%), mentoring (29,7%) and fundraising (29,1%). The results of the study show that half of the male elderly volunteers and half of the female ones have engaged in management activities. While administrative tasks and the ones which consist of nursing are preferred by women, men prefer physical activities (VN, 2013, p. 36). The fact that there is a correlation between gender and the type of activity volunteers engage in is also supported by the report „The situation of volunteering in France” (FB, 2010). According to this study men prefer getting involved in sports or activities which are related to their profession, while women prefer social activities.

Elderly Dutch volunteers mostly participate in activities organized by sports clubs, religious organizations, care and support activities offered to disabled people (EVC, 2007, as cited in Ehlers et al., 2011). Elderly British volunteers also get involved in the activities organized by sports clubs, social organizations (40%), schools or children's organizations

(34%) (Drever, 2010). Italian volunteers engage in activities organized by health organizations (28%), social services (27,8%) and cultural and leisure activities (14,6%).

In Romania no data is available neither with respect to the number of elderly volunteers nor the type of activities they engage in. The only available information is that our elders are mostly active within religious organizations. From our study we can see their preference to engage in activities which involve relating with others.

### 3. 9. How do participants think that elders could be convinced to volunteer?

Elders should first of all be **informed**. If the information doesn't reach them, they probably won't try to find out more about volunteering themselves: *if they are not informed and invited, they don't have the courage to go*. Elders must be informed that there are people in need close by: *and people should be informed about, how should I say, helpless people, elders, about... those in need, in each neighborhood. I may want to help, but I need to know who needs what around here, nearby*.

Then elders should also be **asked** to help. They can respond positively if someone explains to them that their help is needed: *verbally or through banners and stuff like that... to invite us to volunteer; we have ill people in our church, so and so, if someone offers to do something, to stay after the service and talk about this and that and see who can do what. This is one thing. Another thing, those neighborhood meetings were good: we'd better do this, this and this, they should do it through campaigns like this, by putting up posters: „we want to...” do this or that, „who wants to participate?”. Put that on the building entrance door „who wants to take part in” ... „cleaning up around the building” or „who...”. Inform people or better yet urge them to take part in stuff like this*.

Some believe that volunteering should be popularized (*if volunteering is popularized, then many people will come*). Others think that in order for elders to respond positively to such requests, they should be asked by someone close, an acquaintance (*you have to be a good friend of those who you ask to do such a thing, these people have to know you for a very long time*).

Participants believe that **successful volunteer stories** and the testimonials of those who have had such experiences would be more useful in attracting volunteers: *you can tell someone what you did so far and probably you can determine him/her to volunteer as well like that; to give examples, if we volunteer we should also spread the word that “this was done through volunteering”, or “certain problems were solved through volunteering” because there are enough problems which can be solved*.

They also think that there should be a **recognition** (even if it's just a symbolic one) of volunteering: *to be publicly recognized by local authorities by publicly thanking volunteers; gather after a while all those who were successful in their volunteering and give them a diploma, nothing else, just a diploma, gather them there, play a little music, ask the one who was helped to give a speech, bring them together, I mean both the volunteers and the beneficiaries, but as many of them as possible and tell them: talk about your experience, about someone else's, whatever*.

An effective way of getting elders to volunteer would probably be to say: *“At least try it and see what it’s like!”*

One of the authors of the present article wrote her PhD thesis on social volunteering. Next, we shall present a few conclusions drawn from the analysis of the 26 interviews with young (14-30 years old) volunteers from Brasov, who are active in public and private social institutions with respect to volunteer recruitment methods. From the answers provided concerning the existence of volunteer recruitment strategies in the NGOs in which they work, it turned out that most NGOs don’t have any such coherent strategies, or if they do, volunteers are not familiar with them.

However, there are also organizations in which certain people (usually volunteer coordinators) handle this aspect of recruiting potential volunteers in various ways: by creating web pages (a modern strategy, but which is accessible mostly to young people), by initiating awareness campaigns (some organizations take advantage of certain events (1<sup>st</sup> of June, Volunteer Day, World Health Day, etc.) to make themselves visible within the community and to inform the population about their services and activities). Some also make use of visual aids (leaflets, posters) which they distribute in learning institutions (schools, high schools, universities – places which are less accessible to elders), training courses (some of the volunteers believe that a way of promoting volunteering is to have organizations teach courses for those who wish to be volunteers, during which they are told about the organization’s objectives and what volunteers can do to reach these objectives), mass-media (a single volunteer mentioned this promotion channel used by NGOs, an explanation for this being the fact that in general, mass media is interested in high ratings events, which is more than can be said about volunteering).

As this data shows, organizations’ recruitment campaigns are way off from how elders think they could be drawn into volunteering. It is possible that most organizations from Brasov especially target young people for volunteering activities and adapt their recruitment strategies accordingly.

## Conclusions

Elders seem to know the characteristics of volunteering pretty well; they know what it is, especially in theory. The problem is that the examples of volunteering they are familiar with are mostly related to communist “patriotic work”. Their perception of volunteering is therefore distorted. It is likely that the mandatory nature of “volunteer work” from the past prevents them from participating in such activities. They are not familiar with contemporary volunteering, they don’t really know who benefits from volunteering or what institutions organize volunteering activities.

They evaluate volunteering positively, but believe that they wouldn’t be appreciated if they would volunteer, but rather laughed at. This perception is likely to be a major obstacle in motivating Romanians to volunteer, especially when it comes to motivating elder people.

They believe that volunteering is an activity for the young, even though the reasons why they think someone would volunteer are rather specific to third age (for instance

spiritual or religious fulfilment). Volunteering is not among their preoccupations; they don't talk about it, they're not interested in it, because, in their opinion, it's not specific to this stage of their life. They believe that those who volunteer are mostly young people, because they have specific learning, experience gaining and professionalization interests.

In their opinion, volunteering is especially non – institutionalized and this is the type of volunteering they would be more inclined to do. They can be easily convinced to help someone they know, but it would probably be more difficult to convince them to participate in an organized volunteering activity. They are willing to do for others what they do for themselves daily, they would help by doing what they already know how to do, they would probably not be very willing to learn new ways of helping others.

They don't really have reasons to refuse participating in volunteering activities, but they are especially willing to get involved in those which satisfy their various needs (such as socializing). They suggest simple, pleasant activities which are typical in the every-day life of senior citizens. They are convinced that giving advice qualifies as volunteering too and they see themselves as quite competent in this respect.

They can be drawn to volunteering activities. They should be informed about other people's needs; senior citizens should be told about those in need (through brief stories of their life, disease, caregivers, etc.); they should be personally asked to help, be told that their help is needed; they should be told the successful stories of some elder volunteers (so that they may discover that it's possible, that there are people who volunteer and that volunteering brings significant benefits); they should be rewarded for their effort through public recognition.

Women's answers are not that different from those of men. Differences can be noted only in respect to the suggestions of volunteering activities. They are different according to the specific activities of senior citizens (women, for example, suggest knitting, while men suggest chess). Still, there are no significant differences when defining volunteering, types of volunteering, etc. Also, there are no significant differences in the answers given by elderly people according to their level of education. Small differences arise again concerning the types of activities (those with less education suggest activities like house cleaning, those with a higher level of education tend to mention counselling more).

The results of this study could be very useful for theoreticians, public authorities and for practitioners, too. It is estimated that in Romania the share of the population older than or equal to 65 will double, from 15% to 30%, until 2060, with the possibility of exerting a strong pressure on the costs related to pensions, medical services and long-term care services. Despite all the challenges, the aging of population may represent an opportunity in the sense that a larger number of people who have time after retirement can contribute significantly to the development of Romanian society through their social participation in the form of active civic involvement and volunteering.

For this opportunity to become a reality, it is necessary to understand the significances that older people give to volunteering. In order to increase social participation of older people it is important to understand, for example, that they do not know the benefits of volunteering in terms of physical and mental health or that unpaid work is not appreciated. As well it is worth knowing that older people like to socialize or that

recognizing the work of volunteers is crucial for any organization that wants to retain its volunteers and attract new ones.

Also, this data can support the actions of local authorities, public institutions and NGOs to achieve two of the objectives of the National Strategy for Active Aging and the Protection of the Elderly (2015-2020): promoting volunteering and encouraging the inclusion of older people in volunteering and collaborate with the media to improve attitudes towards the elderly and their role in society.

The main limit of our study is the sampling. We managed to follow some important theoretical sampling criteria like age or gender when we interviewed people but we think that other criteria could have been also relevant such as education, financial status etc. We did not manage to check the variation of the answers according to many different criteria.

One of the strengths of our study is the fact that we completed the existing statistics about volunteering and volunteers with qualitative data. We reached some in-depth insights of what the senior citizens of Brasov know, feel and think about this important phenomenon in every society's life. We revealed some interesting perceptions of elders about this topic and we marked the novelty our data brought to the existing knowledge, the implications of significances of volunteering for theory, policy, and practice.

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