Erasmus 4 V.I.P.s

Research on the inclusion and participation of youngsters with visual impairment in learning activities

National Report – Romania

Table of Contents

Introduction

This research was oriented towards offering young people with visual impairments the chance to participate in a structured dialogue activity in which they could express their needs, interests and experiences, especially in terms of personal development through various youth activities. Also, different other NGOs, public institutions and people with no disability were included, in order to gain a wider perspective on the issues that were discussed. While the total number of participating persons and entities is not enough to consider this research a true survey, it did provide us with relevant input on the needs and realities that surround young people with visual impairments.

The research focused on:

- The actual level of inclusion and participation of young people with visual impairments in the learning mobilities;
- The participation of young people with visual impairments in the community;
- The participation of young people with visual impairments in the NGO environment;
- The available support for integration of young people with visual impairments;
- The level of awareness about European learning opportunities

The target group for the survey was represented by:

- Responsible youth NGOs and institutions for education
- Local authorities
- Young people with visual impairments
- Persons with no disability

In Romania, over 160 questionnaires were collected, including:

- 75 young people with visual impairments,
- 72 people without disabilities,
- 9 NGOs offering services and activities to young people,
- 9 public institutions

For public institutions and NGOs the number of questioned entities was higher, but just 9 of them wished to answer.

Two focus group discussions took place in July 2016 in Arad, at the Blinds' association and in the premises of the Volunteering Centre of Arad. There were 2 focus groups; one consisting in 12 young people with visual impairments and one consisting in 12 NGOs and public institutions.

Section 1 - Opinion of young people with visual impairments regarding civil services and local/international opportunities for learning or volunteering

Opinion of young people with visual impairments regarding Civil Services

The questionnaire for Romania on civil services can be considered as highly relevant, as out of the 75 people responding 96% were in contact with different civil services. Out of these, the most accessed were Health and safety, Electoral services, Services related to grants for the disabled and tax offices. The least accessed were the ones related to Licensing and registration, Food safety, planning enforcements or Building regulation.

Even if, in general, civil servants were aware of the disabilities of the persons (as considered by 62% of the respondents), in most of the cases they were perceived as not making any adjustments that took the disability into account. More than 83% of the people with visual impairments declared that in their opinion the civil servants with whom they interacted did not make any adjustments to take their disability into account.

In terms of quality, the experience with services received from Civil Services evaluated as follows:

- Excellent - 1.39 %
- Very good - 9.72 %
- Good - 52.78 %
- Poor - 34.72 %
- Very poor - 1.39 %

Complaints referred to "low accessibility", "lack of interest", and "lack of experience" or "bad behaviour" of the employees from the social services had or even "yelling" on their behalf.

30% of the people with visual disabilities that were questioned considered that they do not have equal access to public services, if compared to people with no disability, especially because of the limitations imposed by the disability itself, but also because of the perception of the people. Actually, 60% of the people who have responded consider that civil services in general do not take their disability into consideration while designing and delivering the services they are supposed to offer. Most of the people consider that this problem originates in the lack of interest shown by public institutions with respect to their needs.

This was also later revealed and confirmed by the answers of the institutions and the NGOs that were questioned, as most of them declared that they do have neither policies nor assistive tools for improving the accessibility for young people with visual impairments.

Most of the people responding indicated that the local authorities are the ones who could do better to promote positive attitudes towards disabled people. Most quoted were city hall, city council, the department for social services and social security, but also hospitals, the public transport services or NGOs. This can partially be explained by the fact that these institutions offer the services that young people with visual impairments are most often using, but it is also an indication that these are also the institutions that need to improve their services the fastest.

It was suggested that civil services could be improved, especially for addressing people with visual impairments, by:

- Having employees that are better informed about the needs of people with disabilities and trained to address them
- Improving accessibility (tactile rugs, audio traffic lights, acoustic signs, Braille signs, audio materials, etc.)
- Having their staff to be more supportive
- Supporting the employment efforts of people with disabilities

It should be noted that a vast majority of people who responded asked for better informed and trained employees and better accessibility.

Opinion of young people with visual impairments regarding local/international opportunities for learning or volunteering

Related to the awareness on the existence of European/international learning opportunities that are addressing youth, most of them are unaware of these (>85%). The most known are the Erasmus+ mobilities, especially youth exchanges.

Less then 6% of the persons interviewed tried to participate to such mobility.

While most of the respondents preferred not to discuss this topic, some of the reasons that were mentioned for not trying to participate to such events were: lack of interest in the topic, fear of not being accepted, fear of not being able to fulfil the tasks, fear of not being a burden to the others and lack of trust in the fact that people with disabilities could be accepted.

Just one person from the ones questioned initially declared that has managed to participate in an international project-addressing people with disability. For the focus group we had another 7 persons that were involved in similar activities.

For the others, the biggest obstacles were, in order:

- Lack of financial resources necessary for participation
- Lack of skills required for participation
- Lack of relevant assistive technologies

All the experiences were generally presented as positive, having a significant impact on the personal development of the participants. There were also some suggestions or remarks, like:

- There need to be more activities involving young people with visual impairments
- There is a need for ensuring a good integration of the people with disabilities, but also caution must be taken against presenting an exaggerated care or an exaggerated protection;
- For ensuring a better participation organizations should take into consideration improving the access of participants with fewer opportunities, especially in terms of mobility;
- Visually impaired young people are usually fearing that they will not be able to integrate;
- Visually impaired young people are also quite hard to reach and there are often cases when they are not interested to get involved;

- The selection of the participants should be more thorough, as sometimes any person with visual impairments is selected just out of empathy;
- Opportunities should address "serious" topics, relevant for the needs of young people with visual impairments. On the other hand, the volume of information should take into consideration the capacity of the participant for assimilating them;
- Organizations should be more aware of the needs of people with visual impairments;

Unfortunately, 87% of the persons questioned said that they were not aware of any NGOs in their local community offering volunteering opportunities for youngsters, showing a big gap in communication and also, as it will later be observed, that opportunities that address young people with visual impairments are quite limited.

Just around 8% of all people questioned tried to volunteer in an NGO.

Main reasons keeping young people with visual impairments from participating were: their fear that their presence will complicate the others' participation, fear that NGOs will not need or accept people with disabilities, fear of not being accepted or fear of not being able to fulfil the tasks.

Only 4% of all people with visual impairments that were questioned said they managed to volunteer in an organisation. Compared to the national average of about 20% of all Romanian population who is involved in volunteering activities, this is significantly lower, showing again the limited access that young people with visual impairments have for developing in this way.

Main reasons preventing them are: lack of relevant assistive technologies, lack of an accessible environment, lack of skills needed for participation or even lack of interest in this field.

The experience was again, presented a positive

The most appropriate channels for communicating the availability of learning and volunteering opportunities were considered to be, in order:

- TV/Radio (by 93%)
- Social media (by 84%)
- Info points (by 68%)
- NGOs offices and staff (by 64%)

These were followed by:

- Newspapers
- Specific websites
- School
- E-mail
- Phone

The participants in the focus groups, who also added, also confirmed most of thee:

- The blinds' association, as the mediator of this relation/communication;
- The creation of a database with contact details from the interested young people with visual impairments;
- Direct meetings for presenting different volunteering opportunities;
- A website that would compile all information about different opportunities;
- A Facebook group addressing people with visual impairments;
- A time-banking initiative, in which people could share their free time in the interest of the young people with visual impairments;

Participants made the following recommendations to NGOs in order for them to offer better volunteering or learning opportunities:

- Promote these opportunities better (by 91%)
- Make participation more affordable for people with disabilities (by 86%)
- Have a more positive attitude towards people with disability, be more sociable (by 83%)
- Make the opportunities more accessible (by 76%)
- Provide assistive technologies that will help you fully participate (assistive, adaptive, and rehabilitative devices) (by 76%)

The focus groups also revealed different other needs and recommendations, like:

- Organizations should have trained staff/volunteers that can ensure the adaptation of the project to the needs of the young people with visual impairments (adaptation of the methods, program, amount of information, of the ways to deliver this information, etc.);
- Members of NGOs should be better aware of the needs young people with visual impairments and to be more open to these. Staff could even experience being partially sighted or blind in a controlled environment (e.g. "Dinner in the dark"), for a better understanding;

- Developing projects that are attractive to the young people with visual impairments;
- Limiting support or positive discrimination to the minimum that is needed for the participation and not offering too much, as this can also lead to a feeling of exclusion;
- Keep a close contact with the Blinds' Association

The young people with visual impairments considered the following learning/volunteering opportunities as interesting:

- Local/international trainings (by 90%). Topics that were suggested were massage, kineto-therapy and IT
- Participating in leisure activities (e.g. camps) (by 87%)
- Local/international workshops (by 86%)
- Local/international volunteering for a cause (by 82%)
- European Youth exchanges (especially targeting development of employability skills) (by 75%)

Most of these were also confirmed in the focus groups, with some extra comments or suggestions, like:

- Developing employability skills, which is a very important topic for the young people with visual impairments, given their low employability rates;
- Developing opportunities for young people with visual impairments to be involved in sport activities (football, goal ball, bowling, chess, backgammon, athletics, etc.);
- Involving them in artistic events (theater or musical shows, dancing, movies, etc.), both as spectators but also as artists;
- Internship opportunities.

Section 2 – Correlation between the opinion of people with visual impairments and situation of Civil Services

Institutions usually overestimated their potential for accessibility, most of them declaring that they are offering the support necessary but later not being able to point out exactly was support is available.

For example, 85% of them declared that they are offering support for young people with mobility and physical disability, 60% for hearing disabilities, 33% for learning disabilities, 50% for people with disabilities connected to mental or emotional health, 33% for the ones connected to speech and language and 66% for people with visual impairments.

On the other hand, when asked to described the type of support that they are offering to people with disabilities, less than 30% of the institutions could do this, which make us question the initial responses.

As it can be observed, support for people facing mobility problems is the most common, as most of the people and institutions associate disability and improving access to building just with people in wheelchairs.

It can also be noticed that for some types of disabilities, even if the institutions are not providing any form of accessibility they are also not considering this necessary, especially when referring to disabilities connected to Learning (66% consider that such service is not needed), Mental or emotional health (50% consider it is not needed) or speech or language (50% consider it is not needed).

In terms of assistance available for people with visual disabilities, the participating institutions declared the following:

Assistance available for persons with visual disabilities	Yes	No
Information material available in appropriate format (Braille, large print, etc.)	14%	85%
Appropriate lighting	85%	14%
A properly structured space (including signs in Braille, tactile floors, removing potential obstacles, etc.)	28%	71%
Electronic reading devices	14%	85%
Specialized staff ready to assist	20%	80%

It can be observed that most of the basic support for people with visual impairments is scarcely available.

In terms of policies for assisting people with disabilities, there is a big difference between disabilities. As it can be observed, again, for mobility disabilities there are 4 times more organisations declaring that they have set-up a policy than, for example, for mental or emotional health or speech and language.

Percentage of organisations declaring that they have set-up a policy for dealing with beneficiaries that face one of the following disabilities:	Yes	No
Mobility and Physical	71%	29%
Hearing	29%	71%
Learning	33%	67%
Mental or emotional health	17%	83%
Speech and language	14%	86%
Visual	43%	57%

71% of the questioned entities said that they have a policy for serving people with disabilities with priority.

On the other hand 86% of the institutions declare not to have a policy for evaluating the efficacy and quality of the support offered to people with disabilities. The example that was most commonly offered for evaluating the satisfaction is the questionnaire for beneficiaries' satisfaction. On the other hand, for young people with visual impairments this is most likely not appropriate and accessible.

None of the institutions questioned consider that there is a need for taking any measures/initiatives to combat staff's negative perceptions, stereotyping and prejudices on people with disabilities. On the other hand, as we can observe from the beneficiaries (young people with visual impairments), they are often affected by the staff's actions.

All the questioned institutions declared that they did not need to take any measures against employees who had negative perceptions about the people with disability. On the other hand, a significant number of people with disability said that they have faced such perceptions, which goes to prove that a better assessment needs to be made by institutions.

71% of the institutions declared that people with disability have the possibility to report when they are subject to discrimination, stereotyping and prejudices from the staff. On the other hand, a lot of the methods that were presented are not typically accessible to different categories of people with disability. Usually, any negative interaction with the staff can be reported by:

- Telephone;
- E-mail;
- The Facebook page;
- Institution's website;
- Specialized forms

It is worth further researching how many of these are also accessible to people with different disabilities.

Section 3 – Correlation between the opinion of people with visual impairments and organisations offering local/international opportunities for learning or volunteering

NGOs showed more realism when assessing their accessibility. Unfortunately, from NGOs that were included in the survey none was accessible for people with hearing disability, or speech and language disabilities. Just 10% of them declared that they are offering support for young people with mobility and physical disability, 20% for learning disabilities, 10% for people with disabilities connected to mental or emotional health, and 10% for people with visual impairments.

What is really problematic is that, even if the NGOs questioned are not providing any form of accessibility they are also not considering this necessary, with 60% to 80% of them stating that there are no plans for this as it is not necessary. This can also explain in a way the results of the questionnaires addressing people with disabilities, who in their vast majority declared that they are not actively engaged in any activities connected to NGOs.

In terms of assistance offered to people with visual impairments, results confirm the previous findings, as most of the assistive support is not present in the NGOs that were questioned

Assistance offered to beneficiaries with visual impairments	Yes	No
Information material available in appropriate format (Braille, large print, etc.)	0%	100%
Appropriate lighting	22%	78%
A properly structured space (including signs in Braille, tactile floors, removing potential obstacles, etc.)	0%	100%
Electronic reading devices	0%	100%
Specialized staff ready to assist	12%	88%

Also in terms of policies for assisting people with disabilities with whom the organisations are interacting, the results are not very encouraging.

	Yes	No
Mobility and Physical	0%	100%
Hearing	0%	100%
Learning	22%	78%
Mental or emotional health	11%	89%
Speech and language	0%	100%
Visual	0%	100%

66% of the organisations declared that they have a policy for serving people with disabilities with priority.

On the other hand, 89% of them say that they do not have a policy for evaluating the efficacy and quality of the support offered to people with disabilities.

Also, 67% of the organisation have not taken any measures/initiatives to combat staff's negative perceptions, stereotyping and prejudices of people with disabilities and do not feel the need to do this. 22% declare that they have plans for this and 11% that they already do this. Most of the plans refer to questionnaires for assessing the perception or satisfaction.

None of the NGOs that were questioned felt the need to take actions when negative perceptions were identified.

On the other hand, it was considered by a significant part of the organisations that their staff might feel a bit uncomfortable when working with young people with visual impairments, that they would not know how to approach this target group, that they would need some time to adjust to this or even that they would have a mental block.

Just 10% of the organisations offer young people with visual impairments the possibility to report when they are subject to discrimination, stereotyping and prejudices from their staff. 22% plan to do this in the future and 68% have no plan to do this, as they consider it is not necessary.

NGOs offering formal or non-formal learning opportunities that are accessible to people with disabilities (in %, also with the examples). Please be aware that in the on-line questionnaire there is no section about the types of opportunities, so you will have to take this information from the physical (original) questionnaires.

Just 11% of the organisations that were questioned are offering volunteering opportunities to people with visual impairments and another 22% plan to do this in the future. Still, 67% of the organisations are not interested at the moment in this topic.

Just 11% of the organisations that were questioned are offering free time/leisure opportunities to people with visual impairments and another 22% plan to do this in the future. Still, 67% of the organisations are not interested at the moment in this topic.

Main barriers that were identified for not involving young people with visual impairments were mostly connected to the lack of knowledge/of experience connected to the topic.

Just 11% of the organisations have involved people with disabilities in their activities.

When going deeper into this, in the focus groups, we have found out several important aspects related to the involvement of NGOs in activities that could also address/include young people with visual impairments .

As is can be observed, NGOs have a very limited experience in working with young people with visual impairments. There are different reasons for this, like:

- They did not take this target group into consideration;
- They were not aware of their needs, so they did not know how to respond to them;
- There was no request from young people with visual impairments to join their activities;
- They are not prepared to work with this target group, they would first need training for it;

- There was no previous experience and the challenge was considered to be too great;

Analysing the level of awareness related to the potential involvement of people with visual impairments in the regular activities of the organisation, we have found that a significant proportion of the NGOs were not aware of activities which can be suitable for young people with visual impairments . Still, some could mention different activities like:

- Sporting activities;
- Working as masseurs;
- Volunteering for, working in or managing organizations that address the needs of other visual impaired young people;
- Playing different board games;
- Participating in different thematic camps;
- Being artists;

Representatives of NGOs also suggested that this target group could also benefit from more awareness raising campaigns or even "ambassadors" promoting their cause.

As organisations showed a great interest for involving more young people with visual impairments , they also mentioned what would be their needs in terms of being better prepared for this. These needs included:

- Trainings/awareness seminars on: ways to involve VIPs in youth work, learning their needs, finding out their potential, adapting the typical working methods to their needs/realities,
- A better infrastructure, more accessible;
- Examples of methods, activities or projects which are suitable for the young people with visual impairments, good practice models;
- Ways to get in contact with them;
- Ways to evaluate their profile and potential, what can they do;
- Mentoring from specialists in working with young people with visual impairments.

In terms of training the staff/volunteers of the organisations, it is widely considered that each NGO should have at least one person trained in working with/for young people with visual impairments . For public institutions it was suggested that each

person who might get in contact with VIPs should have at least a basic form of training.

On the other hand, organisations presented some of the main barriers in involving VIPs in their activities:

- Not knowing their needs
- Not knowing their potential and the type of activities they can be involved in
- Staff not feeling comfortable when working with VIPs, not knowing how to react, being maybe overprotective;

Asked if they could foresee how some of their current activities could be adapted to also include young people with visual impairments, participating organisations offered examples like:

- Trainings
- Working in a community garden
- Sport activities
- Teaching foreign languages
- Touristic activities
- Classes on healthy living
- Leisure activities

Also organisations presented some examples of services/projects that they could offer to people with visual impairments, like:

- Trainings for developing employability skills
- Music workshops and music therapy
- Youth exchanges
- Thematic camps
- Social activities involving both young people with visual impairments and young people with typical development
- Awareness campaigns
- Offering volunteering opportunities for people with visual impairments
- Artistic workshops
- Opportunities to use their skills in massage therapy
- Trainings for using the computer
- Developing their entrepreneurial skills

Information about different opportunities that exist for involving people with visual impairments was quite limited, but some examples were offered:

▰ Special trainings addressing VIPs
▰ Movies that are adapted for the blind
▰ Employment support schemes for visual impaired people;

At the moment, for addressing the young people with visual impairments, organisations are taking into consideration the following:

▰ Social media
▰ Direct contact
▰ Phone
▰ The Blinds' association

Main challenges organisations consider they would have while trying to communicate VIPs are:

▰ Lack of information/skills regarding this target group
▰ Limited logistics/adapted infrastructure
▰ Gaining their trust

Section 4 – Perception of general population related to disability

Most of the people declared that they are acquainted with disability (close to 90%)

Their sources of information about disability are, in descending order:

- The personal research/need for information (for 59%)
- Media and the Internet (for 44%)
- Work environment (for 18%)
- Disabled friends or carers of people with disability/ies (for 16%)
- Studies (for 16%)

People usually have a positive/empathic view on disability.

- 93% would hang out with a disabled person.
- 75% would provide care and accommodation overnight for a disabled child
- 88% do not consider that a disabled person is a punishment for his family
- 71% do not consider that a disabled person is unbearable burden to his family
- 85% do not consider that disabled children should not be born

People see disability as follows:

- Different way of life - 52%
- Problem – 7%
- Incompetence – 13%
- Disease – 28%

The main barriers people face for interacting more with people with disability are:

- Different way of life – for 16%
- Lack of accessible places for hanging out/interacting – for 10%
- Their need for assistance – for 7%
- Difficulty in interacting with them – for 4%

Close to half of the people that were interviewed said that they do not face any mental barriers while interacting with people with disability.

Most of the people are referring to a person with disability as "a person with disability" (84%) of people, while the phrase "he suffers from" is the choice for 16% of all persons interviewed.

80% of people questioned do totally agree that people with disability are common people with their own personality and abilities.

55 % of persons interviewed said that they consider the people with disabilities have less productive capacity, 87% that the disabled are heroes who exceed their physical as well as architectural obstacles and 93% agree that people with disabilities can work

Regarding the support that should be offered to the people with disabilities opinions is:

- Initiatives should be given by the State to encourage private enterprises to recruit people with disabilities - 99% agree or partially agree.
- There should be introduced more flexible working conditions for persons who take care of a disabled person (eg. Part time)- 91% agree or partially agree.
- There must be established vocational training schools for people with disabilities - 98% agree or partially agree.

Achievements considered being possible for people with disabilities:

	Mental Disability	Blindness	Deafness	Mobility Disability
Work	33%	74%	74%	63%
Study	39%	76%	71%	76%
Get married	31%	75%	75%	69%
Have children	24%	67%	74%	60%
Lead an autonomous life	0%	57%	65%	60%
Have a good time	68%	76%	72%	81%
Have social life	74%	78%	78%	76%
Travel	44%	63%	65%	61%
Elect	32%	67%	68%	65%
Be elected	26%	60%	61%	63%

Related to interacting with persons with disabilities, people declare they would feel:

- Insecure - 84%
- Afraid – 85%
- Willing – 73%
- Embarrassed - 35%

Close to 70% of people did not consider offering support to people with disability (in %), main reasons for this being:

- Lack of time – for 54%
- Difficulty to work with people with disability – for 21%
- Lack of skills for offering support – for 17%
- Lack of awareness on opportunities for volunteering – for 14%

Conclusions

Main findings:

1. 30% of the people with visual disabilities that were questioned considered that they do not have equal access to public services, if compared to people with no disability, especially because of the limitations imposed by the disability itself, but also because of the perception of the people. 60% of the people who have responded consider that civil services in general do not take their disability into consideration while designing and delivering the services they are supposed to offer, showing a need for improvement.

2. Young people with visual impairments feel rather unsatisfied with the civil services they interact with. 83% of the people with visual impairments declared that in their opinion the civil servants with whom they interacted did not make any adjustments to take their disability into account. 37% of them rated the public services as poor or very poor. In extent to this, almost none of the institutions questioned had a policy for evaluating the efficacy and quality of the support offered to people with disabilities, which help perpetuate this problem.

3. This situation is confirmed also by analyzing the assistance that young people with visual impairments can benefit from when in a public institution. 70% of them are not offering the basic assistance for people with visual impairments. Most of the accessibility improvements have targeted people in wheelchairs, improving accessibility being often identified just with creating ramps for access.

4. Even if there are complaints from the young people with visual impairments that refer to "low accessibility", "lack of interest", "lack of experience" or "bad behavior" of the employees from the social services had (even "yelling" on their behalf), not even one of the institutions has considered the need for taking any measures/initiatives to combat staff's negative perceptions, stereotyping and prejudices of people with disabilities.

5. 71% of the institutions declared that people with disability have the possibility to report when they are subject to discrimination, stereotyping and prejudices from the staff. On the other hand, a lot of the methods that

were presented are not typically accessible to different categories of people with disability. Given also the perception of young people with visual impairments regarding the quality of services that public institutions provide, it can be observed that these reporting methods have not reached their goal.

6. Most of young people with visual impairments (>85% of them) are unaware of on the existence of European/international learning opportunities that are addressing youth.

7. Participation rates of the young people with visual impairments to youth mobilities or other youth projects are very low. As much as 94% of the persons interviewed have not even tried to participate to such an experience.

8. Some of the reasons that were mentioned for not trying to participate to such events were: lack of interest in the topic, fear of not being accepted, fear of not being able to fulfill the tasks, fear of not being a burden to the others and lack of trust in the fact that people with disabilities could be accepted. This was confirmed also by the findings related to the accessibility of NGOs, close to 90% of them declaring that they are not accessible to people with visual impairments.

9. NGOs are usually not taking into consideration the inclusion of people with disability. Just about 10% of the organisations that were questioned are offering volunteering; learning or leisure opportunities to people with visual impairments and two thirds of them are not even interested in addressing this target group in the future. 89% of them say that they do not have a policy for evaluating the efficacy and quality of the support offered to people with disabilities.

10. Just one person with visual impairments of the 73 initially questioned declared that he has managed to participate in an international project-addressing people with disability. This participation rate is far too low and needs to be addressed.

11. 87% of the young people with visual impairments questioned said that they were not aware of any NGOs in their local community offering volunteering opportunities for youngsters. Just 11% of the organisations that were questioned are offering volunteering opportunities to people with visual impairments and another 22% plan to do this in the future. Still, 67% of the

organisations are not interested at the moment in this topic. This is showing a big gap in the promotion of these opportunities, those opportunities that address young people with visual impairments are quite limited and that there is quite low interest in the organizations to improve this.

12. Just around 8% of all people questioned tried to volunteer in an NGO and just 4% managed to do this. This is significantly lower than the national average among people with no disability, of which is more than 20% have volunteered in their life. Main reasons for this are: their fear that their presence will complicate the others' participation, fear that NGOs will not need or accept people with disabilities, fear of not being accepted or fear of not being able to fulfil the tasks, lack of relevant assistive technologies, lack of an accessible environment, lack of skills needed for participation or even lack of interest in this field.

13. Media and internet are the most used resources the people use for learning about the needs of people with disabilities

14. People usually have a positive/empathic view on disability. Close to half of the people that were interviewed said that they do not face any mental barriers while interacting with people with disability and more than 90% agreed to positive action (a.k.a. positive discrimination) in the interest of people with disability.

15. On the other hand, close to 70% of people interviews did not consider offering support to people with disability, for reasons like lack of time, difficulty to work with people with disability, lack of skills for offering support or lack of awareness on opportunities for volunteering;

Recommendations:

There is a significant and urgent need for the improvement of civil services in terms of making them more accessible for people with disabilities, especially with visual ones.

Some suggestions for improvement are:

- Having their staff to be more supportive, taking measures/initiatives to combat staff's negative attitudes and perceptions, stereotyping and prejudices related to people with disabilities.
- Having employees that are more aware of the needs of people with disabilities and trained to address them
- Improving accessibility (e.g. by tactile rugs, audio traffic lights, acoustic signs, Braille signs, audio materials, etc.)
- Supporting the employment efforts of people with disabilities
- Developing specific policies for serving people with disabilities
- Developing and implementing measures for evaluating the effectiveness and quality of the support offered to people with disabilities, including the attitude of staff
- Adjusting the evaluation and complaint forms in order for them to be accessible for people facing all disabilities

Awareness should be raised on the fact that disability and accessibility do not refer only to people in wheelchairs. Institutions usually overestimate their accessibility. They should be better aware that accessibility means a lot more than one partial adjustment. They must take into consideration the whole range of activities that are required to benefit from one service, including moving from home to the venue, accessing the venue, working with the needed tools or documents, having the possibility to offer feedback, etc. For example, if the offices provide support for the young people with visual impairments but there are no Braille signs leading the person to them, accessibility is not really achieved.

There is a need for more volunteering/learning/leisure opportunities that address young people with visual impairments. There is a need for more diverse activities involving young people with visual impairments .

NGOs should be encouraged to generate these kind of projects, by:

- Making them aware that there is a need for such initiatives, that this is also an important target group and that involving in this kind of activities is not as challenging as they perceive;
- Helping their staff to be more aware of the needs of young people with visual impairments , so they know how to respond to them;
- Training their staff to work with this target group, especially on: ways to involve VIPs in youth work, learning their needs, finding out their potential, adapting the typical working methods to their needs/realities, adaptation of the amount of information, of the ways to deliver this information, etc.
- Training their staff to be more comfortable and open for working with young people with visual impairments ;
- Teaching organizations how to make their spaces more accessible;
- Helping them develop projects that are attractive to the young people with visual impairments;
- Providing good practice models or examples of methods, activities or projects which are suitable for the young people with visual impairments;
- Facilitating the connection between NGOs and young people with visual impairments;
- Providing them with mentoring/support from specialists in working with young people with visual impairments;
- Helping them in breaking the mental barriers that exist in working with young people with visual impairments, by training or even by having their staff experience the realities of being visually impaired (e.g. "Dinner in the dark").

In terms of training the staff/volunteers of the organisations, it is widely considered that each NGO should have one person trained in working with/for young people with visual impairments . For public institutions it was suggested that each person who might get in contact with VIPs should have at least a basic form of training.

Also, for offering better volunteering or learning opportunities or opportunities for participation in international mobilities, NGOs or other interested entities should:

- Offer opportunities that take into consideration the financial limitations that people with disabilities face;
- Have the necessary assistive technologies and ensure the appropriate accessibility of spaces;
- Ensure a good integration of the people with disabilities, but also avoid presenting an exaggerated care or an exaggerated protection; Addressing the typical fears that young people with visual impairments have when

thinking to join such an initiative: fear of not being accepted; fear of not being able to fulfill the tasks; fear of not being a burden to the others; lack of trust in the fact that people with disabilities could be accepted;

- Limiting support or positive discrimination to the minimum that is needed for the participation and not offering too much, as this can also lead to a feeling of exclusion;
- Fostering the group integration of people with visual impairments and assuring them about this
- Having a thorough selection of the participants, as sometimes any young person with visual impairments is selected just out of empathy;
- Addressing topics that are relevant for the needs of young people with visual impairments.
- Check and ensure that the staff has a positive attitude towards people with disability;

The relation between the young people with visual impairments , the associations that represent them, other youth NGOs and the local authorities should be strengthened.

There is a need for more awareness raising campaigns or even "ambassadors" promoting the cause of young people with visual impairments .

Some topics/activities that were identified as interesting for young people with visual impairments are:

- Local/international trainings. The most interesting topic was related to the development of employability skills, which is a very important matter for the young people with visual impairments, given their low employability rates; Other topics that were suggested were massage, kineto-therapy, IT, foreign languages, entrepreneurship, working as phone operator, etc.
- Leisure activities (e.g. camps, sport activities, board games)
- Artistic events (theater or musical shows, dancing, movies, etc.), both as spectators but also as artists;
- Local/international workshops
- Local/international volunteering for a cause, volunteering for, working in or managing organizations;
- Youth exchanges
- Internship opportunities.
- Thematic camps
- Music workshops and music therapy

- Social activities involving both young people with visual impairments and young people with typical development
- Awareness campaigns
- Opportunities to use their skills in massage therapy

As often young people with visual impairments are quite hard to reach and there are often cases when they are not interested to get involved, this needs to be addressed.

The most appropriate channels for communicating the availability of learning and volunteering opportunities were considered to be, in order:

- TV/Radio
- Social media (e.g. a Facebook group or page addressing people with visual impairments)
- Info points (or the equivalent in on-line: a website that would compile all information about different opportunities)
- NGOs offices and staff

These were followed by

- Newspapers
- Specific websites
- School
- E-mail
- Phone

Other options were also presented as appropriate, like:

- Using the local blinds' association, as the mediator of this relation/communication;
- The creation of a database with contact details from the interested young people with visual impairments;
- Direct meetings for presenting different volunteering opportunities;
- A time-banking initiative, in which people could share their free time in the interest of the young people with visual impairments;

Organisations, public institutions and other entities that can offer young people with visual impairments different opportunities for personal development or leisure should use the goodwill that exists in the society related to this target group and to people with disabilities in general.

More promotion of volunteering for the cause of young people with visual impairments should be made, especially tackling the main barriers that prevent people from involving in this (e.g. lack of time , difficulty to work with people with disability, lack of skills for offering, lack of awareness on opportunities for volunteering).

The "Erasmus 4 VIPs" project is co-funded by the

Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

**Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union**