

HOW EUROPEAN VOLUNTARY SERVICE IMPACTS COMMUNITIES: RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research conducted by Sandra Navickaitė

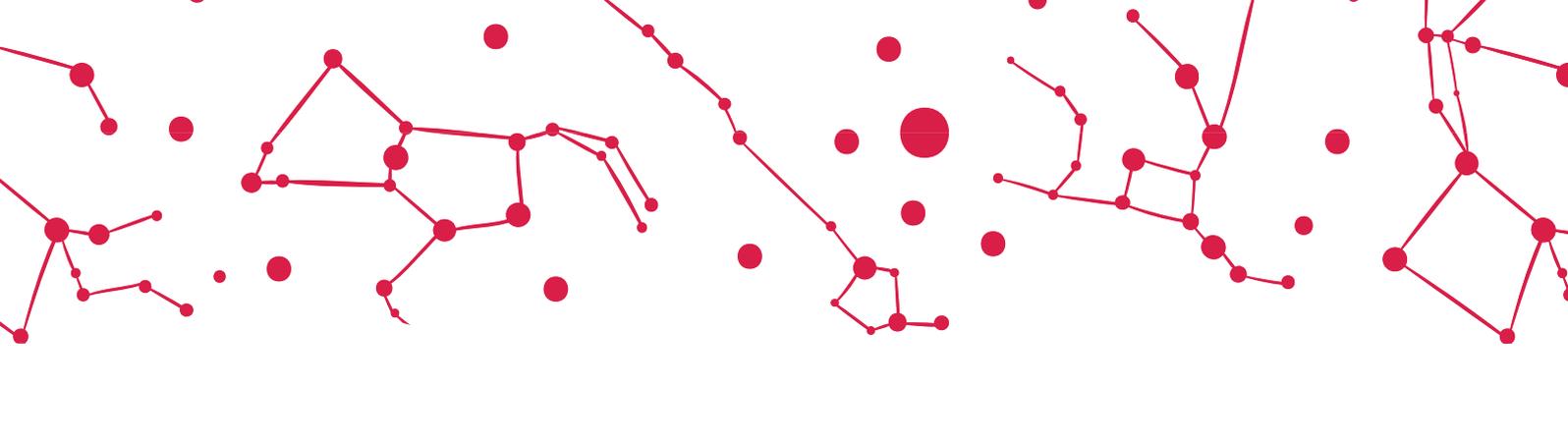


AGENCY OF
INTERNATIONAL
YOUTH
COOPERATION



Erasmus+





INTRODUCTION

In year 2016 the Seimas of the Lithuanian Republic¹ has agreed to the ruling of “Announcing the year 2016 to become the Local community year”. With this ruling, the Seimas has decided on the following: “while placing the emphasis on the importance of local communities in the implementation of regional politics on the national and the European Union level; taking into account the aim to strengthen local governance that should provide basis for the formation of civil society; considering the local community civil spirit and active participation as the most important premises for the economic, social and cultural expansion, announces the year 2016 to become the Local community year.”

2016 is an important year to the European Voluntary Service (further referred to as the EVS) as it celebrates its 20 year anniversary. The EVS started in 1996 as a pilot action, but given its successful start, the European Commission launched the *European Voluntary Service Community Action Programme*. This programme operated throughout 1998–1999. Then EVS became part of the *YOUTH* programme (2000–2006) and later functioned under the *Youth in Action* programme (2007–2013). Currently it operates as a part of *Erasmus+ programme* (2014–2020).

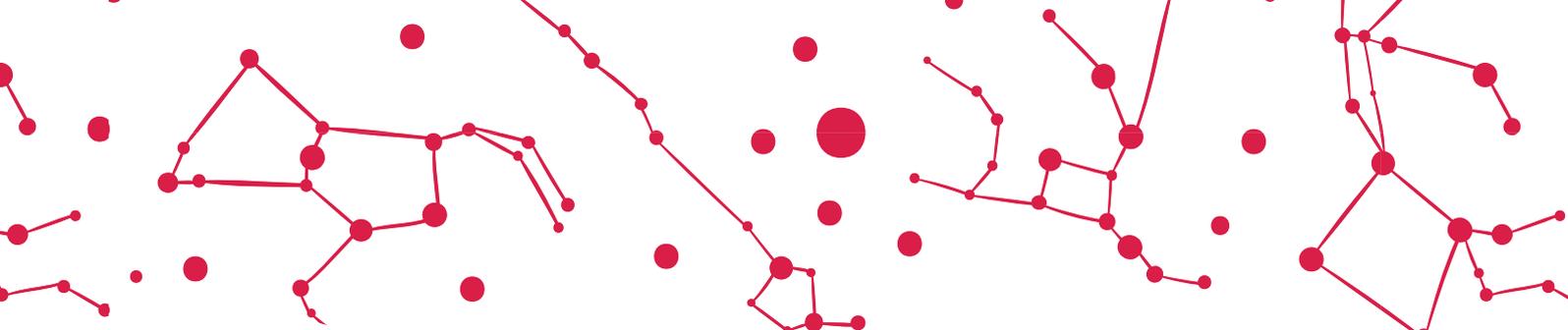
Throughout the 20 years of its activity, thousands of EVS projects have been implemented which is why it is important to measure the impact of this programme using not only quantitative, but also qualitative methods with the aim to understand who gets affected by the EVS programme and how does it happen.

In 2008 *Research – based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action (RAY Network)* was founded. Its main aim is to contribute towards improving the quality of the EU youth programmes by conducting research and on-going interviews in 31 countries.

In year 2011 *RAY Network* conducted an international research examining “The results and the impact of the EU programme *Youth in Action* according to the project participants and managers”. 90% of the participants have answered that they do notice how the EU programme *Youth in Action* has an impact on their communities. It has been noted that the communities get actively involved and take part in the EVS projects. This has confirmed that the EVS volunteers have a strong connection with the communities where they conduct their activities, however, it has not been specified how this effect manifests in the communities, what is the connection between the volunteer and the community and what happens in the community when “the other” – a foreigner – arrives.

With the aim to gather some data about the impact of the EVS volunteers on the local communities, an international research has been initiated in Lithuania, Poland and Hungary. In Lithuania the research was requested by the Agency of International Youth Cooperation.

¹ The unicameral Parliament of Lithuania

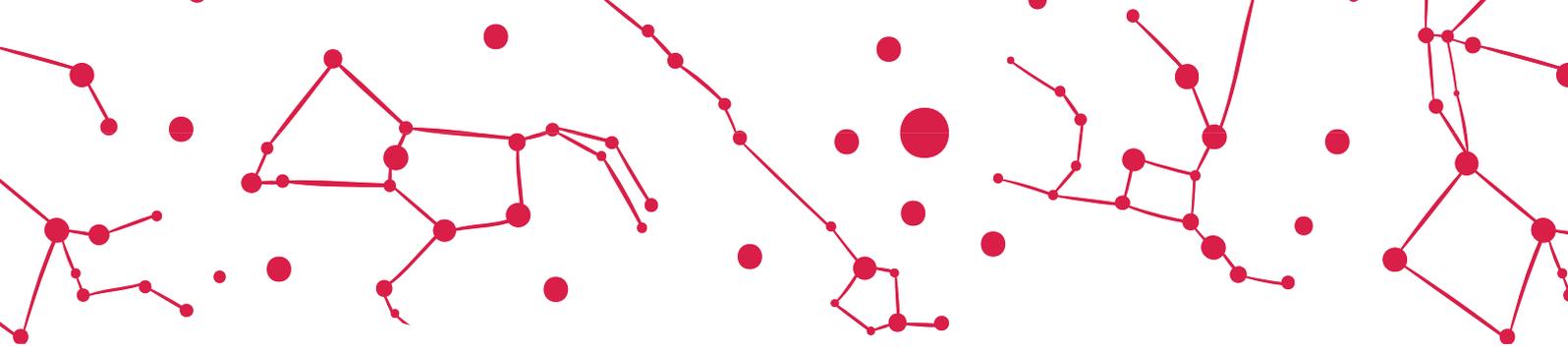


RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the research is to find out what happens in the organisations and the communities that host the European Voluntary Service volunteers.

OBJECTIVES:

- To find out what impact do the international EVS volunteers have on their communities
- To understand what social capital is dominant in those communities and what importance does it have when working with the EVS volunteers
- To examine how do the people involved contribute towards the meaning of the programme and what impact does it have on them
- To get familiar with the dominant understanding of the international volunteering initiatives and the impact that this understanding has on the actions of the programme
- To find out what are the challenges, difficulties as well as the uplifting matters that the volunteers, organisations and communities face during their EVS experience.



EUROPEAN VOLUNTARY SERVICE IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

INSIGHTS

COMMUNITIES HAVE CHANGED: THEIR OPENNESS AND ABILITY TO TRUST “THE OTHER” HAS IMPROVED

At the beginning of the research community views about foreigners were dominated by prejudice based on the rumours or opinions formed by the media. The communities that hosted EVS volunteers for the first time had their first experience of working with foreigners. This changed their view and understanding of the people from abroad. The locals broke the prevailing stereotypes, started to take interest in other cultures, tried to understand and show more trust in foreigners.

The research showed that in communication with the EVS volunteers, people become more open towards a “different” person, “different” perspective. The mistrust and fear towards foreigners decreases and instead trust, willingness to understand and empathy increases.

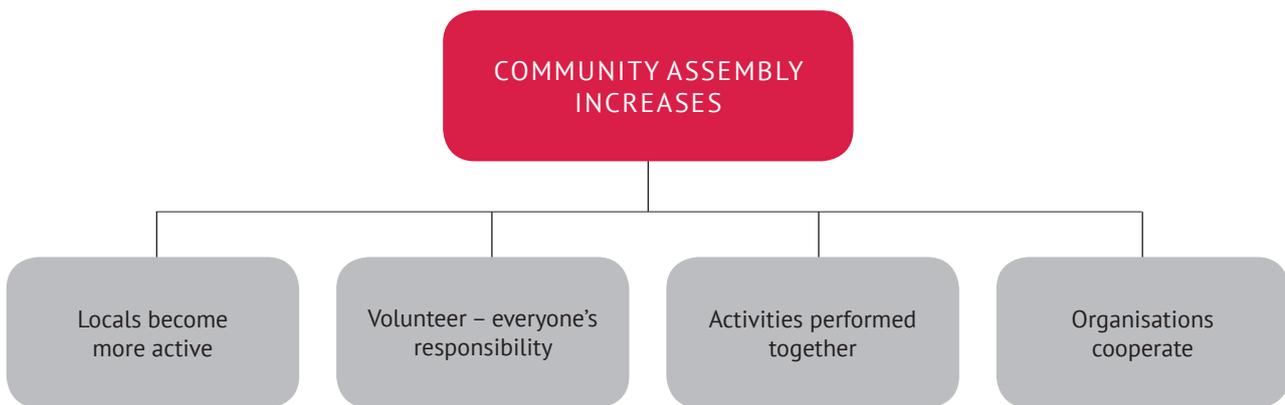
“THE OTHER” – A VOLUNTEER FROM ABROAD – LEADS THE COMMUNITIES TO REFLECT AND LEARN

In communication with the volunteers, the communities start to share their own views and impressions about their life as a community. This self-reflection process leads to noticing their strengths and weaknesses.

Participation in the EVS programme encourages them to raise questions, to doubt and to reconsider the core provisions and principles that the community functions by. Whereas at the beginning of the research stereotypical views on foreigners prevailed and it appeared to be clear to the communities how should they work with people from abroad, by the end of the research communities were not that certain about it anymore, new considerations and discussions have been raised.

The volunteers help to decrease the separation between the community and its “other” members: as they do not have any prejudices or opinions about the locals, they try to connect and communicate with all community members, including those who experience social exclusion. The volunteer thus became an example of tolerance and acceptance that the locals could learn from.

COMMUNITIES ASSEMBLE

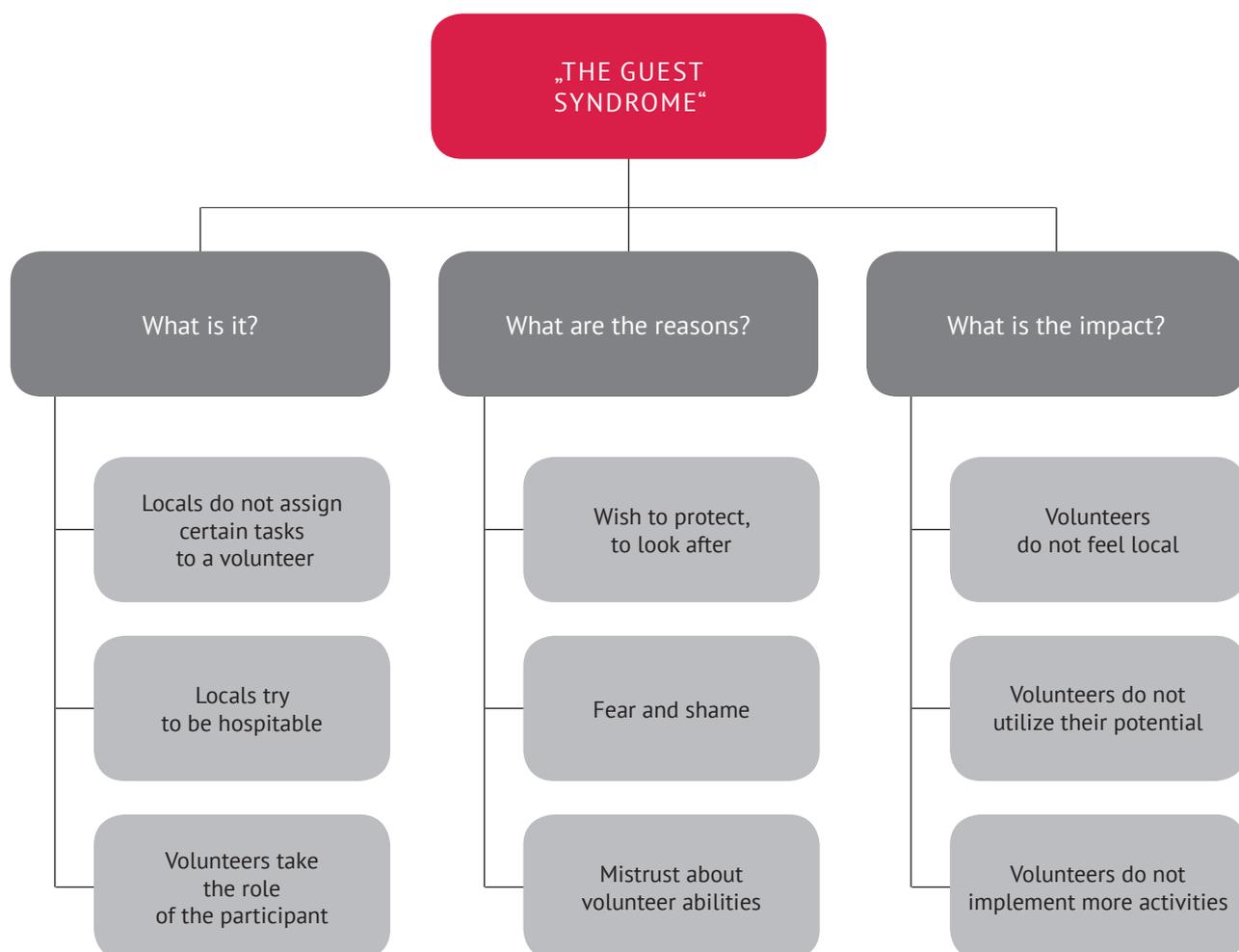


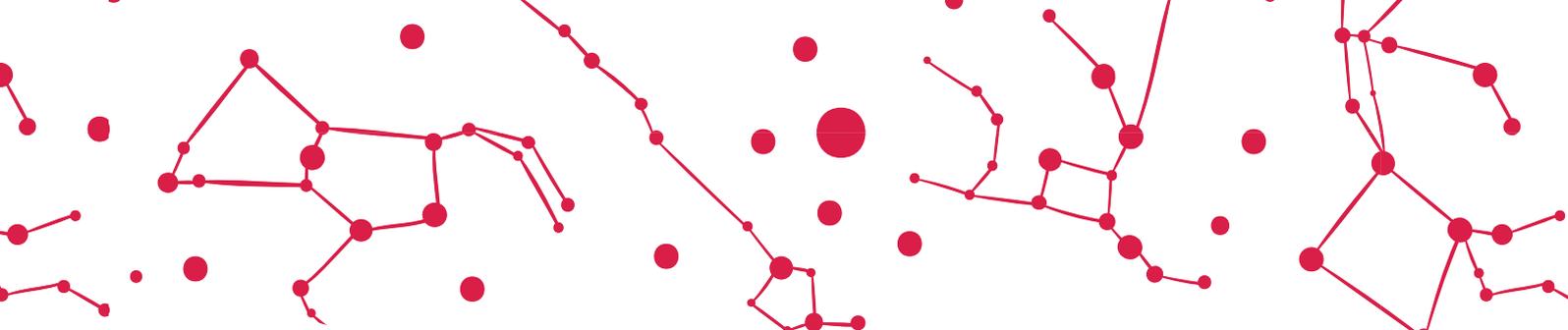
The research data has shown that through the implementation of the EVS programme local community members and organisations assemble to perform activities together, their social capital grows.

- a. **Locals become more active:** they get involved in community activities.
- b. **Volunteer – everyone's responsibility:** since all the community is responsible for the international volunteers, the volunteers become the reason for the community members to come together.
- c. **Activities performed together:** the volunteers organize activities for the community members and involve the "other" – socially excluded – community members.
- d. **Organisations cooperate:** thanks to the volunteers, communities begin to cooperate with various local organisations, the community social network expands.

COMMUNITIES GO THROUGH THE PROCESS OF CHANGE: “THE OTHER” BECOMES “ONE OF OURS”

The organisations and communities go through the process of “the other” integrating and becoming local – “one of ours”. An increasing desire to understand, explore and empathize with the world of a visitor – their guest – becomes apparent.



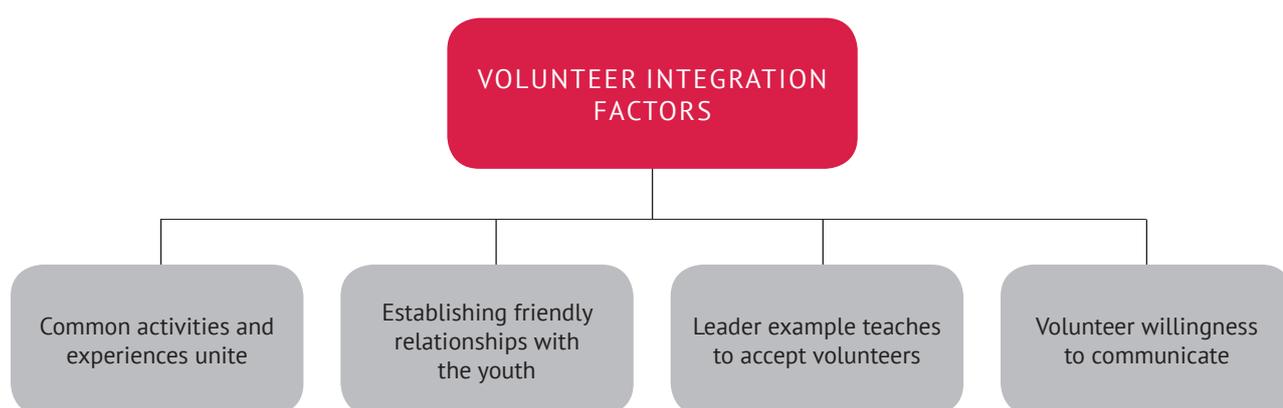


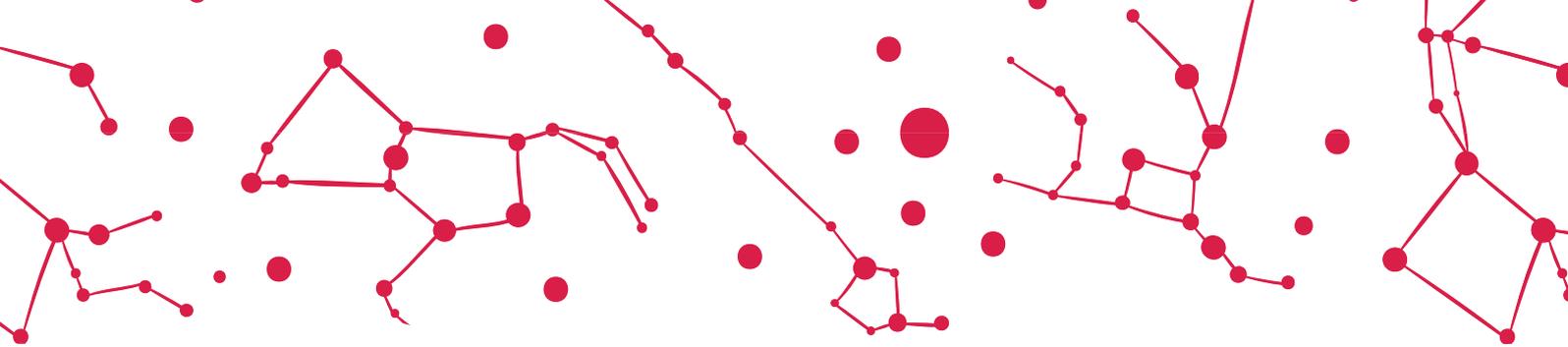
“The Guest Syndrome” – category in vivo, which describes how the organisations treated their volunteers as if they were guests: they tried to be hospitable and did not assign difficult or unpleasant tasks. The volunteers often took on the role of participants, but not that of helpers or organizers. The main reasons for the occurrence of this “syndrome” were shame and fear. The locals were frightened that the volunteers might see that there was “something wrong” with their community. The wish to protect and to look after the volunteers prevailed. Also, the members of the community were mistrustful of the volunteer abilities to perform the tasks that were not easy or pleasant.

“The Guest Syndrome” prevented the volunteers from being active and implementing more activities than it was planned for them. Because of the prevalent “guest syndrome”, communities did not fully utilize the potential of the volunteer and did not cease the opportunity to make them feel valuable. When the volunteers were greeted as “others”, “guests”, they could not feel as if they were part of the community, locals, “one of them”.

The research has shown that the process of preparation for the volunteer integration into the organisation and the community varies. The dominant community attitude towards this issue determines the process. Communities that put some thought into the aspect of integration and prepared for it, were able to help the volunteer to settle more smoothly and made the process of integration easier. The volunteers were prompt to grasp the norms and rules that were prevalent in the community. This helped them to achieve the sense of becoming local more rapidly.

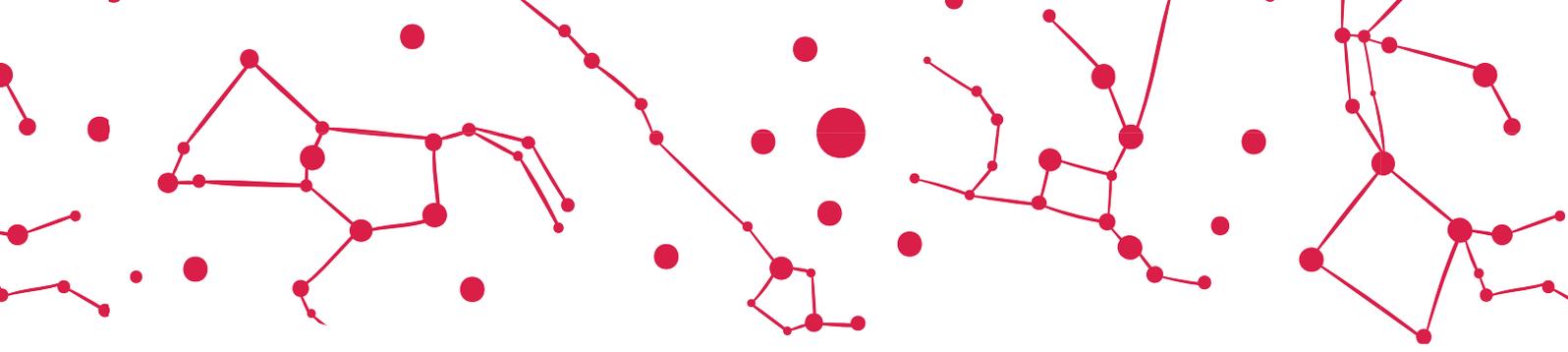
Factors that encourage volunteer integration into the community and the life of the organisation:





- a. **Common activities and experiences unite:** activities in which community members take part along with the volunteers, unite the community members.
- b. **Establishing friendly relationships with the youth:** becoming part of the local youth social circles helps the volunteers to integrate and to get to know the community better.
- c. **Leader example teaches to accept volunteers:** during the volunteer integration process, the leader of the organisation undertakes an important role of setting the example to the other employees that should encourage them to look after and contribute towards the volunteer integration.
- d. **Volunteer willingness to communicate:** the personal qualities of the volunteer, their communication skills, open-mindedness, curiosity and willingness to communicate, also encourage the integration process.

In those organisations where the dominant attitude towards volunteer integration was that of understanding it as a natural self-driven process which should not be artificially stimulated, volunteer integration into the life of the organisation and the community has taken longer. Some of the volunteers did not feel integrated into the community till the very end of their volunteering experience.



COMMUNITY PREPARATION FOR THE EVS PROGRAMME AND ASSOCIATED CHALLENGES

There are two dominant types of the community preparation for the EVS programme:

- First one, a lot of work and attention goes into the preparation: taking care of the practical matters, planning volunteer activities, preparing the schedule in advance, distributing responsibilities, keeping the locals informed about the volunteering activities and the arrival of the volunteers. In the communities where such preparation was happening, the volunteers were prompt to grasp the prevalent norms and rules and it has led to the rapid volunteer integration.
- Second, in the communities where the only preparation was done by getting ready to respond to the volunteer needs upon their arrival, the volunteers have experienced a difficult start. It has taken them a while to understand how the organisation functions, what is acceptable in the community and what is not. Their role and responsibilities were not clear to them.

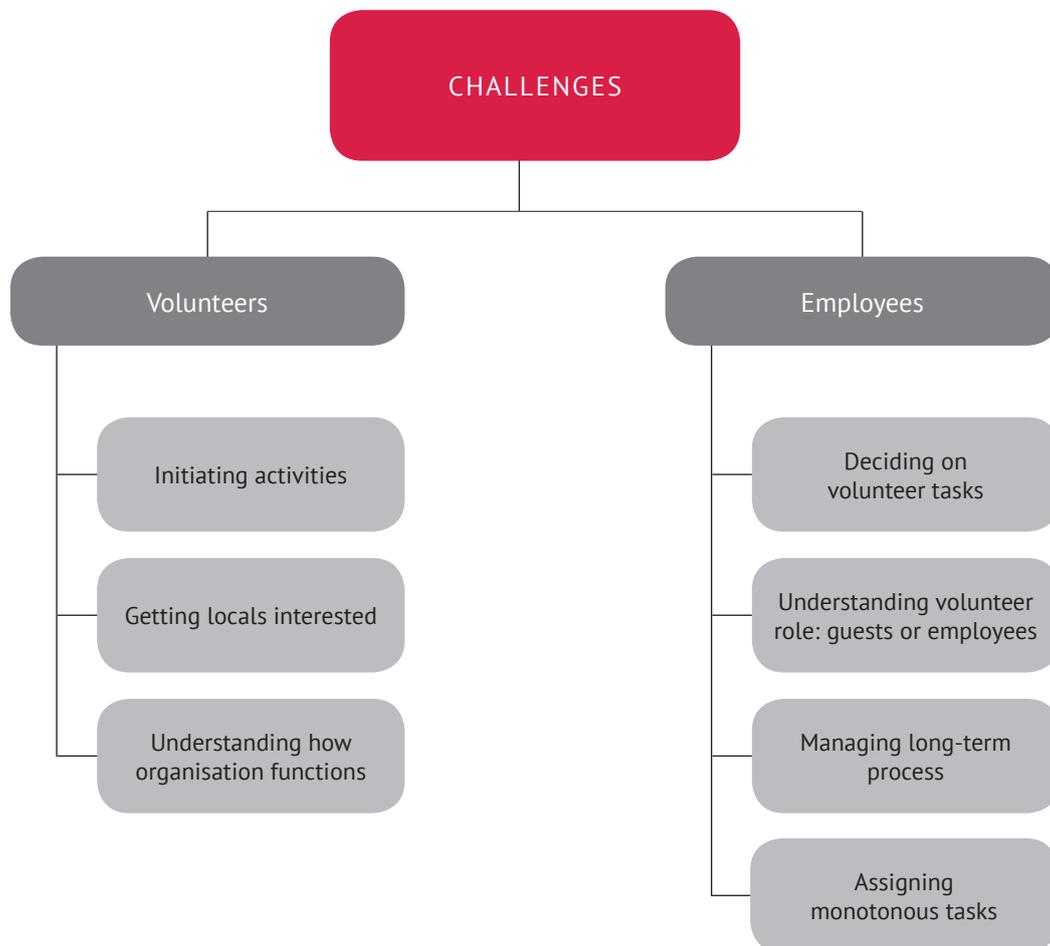
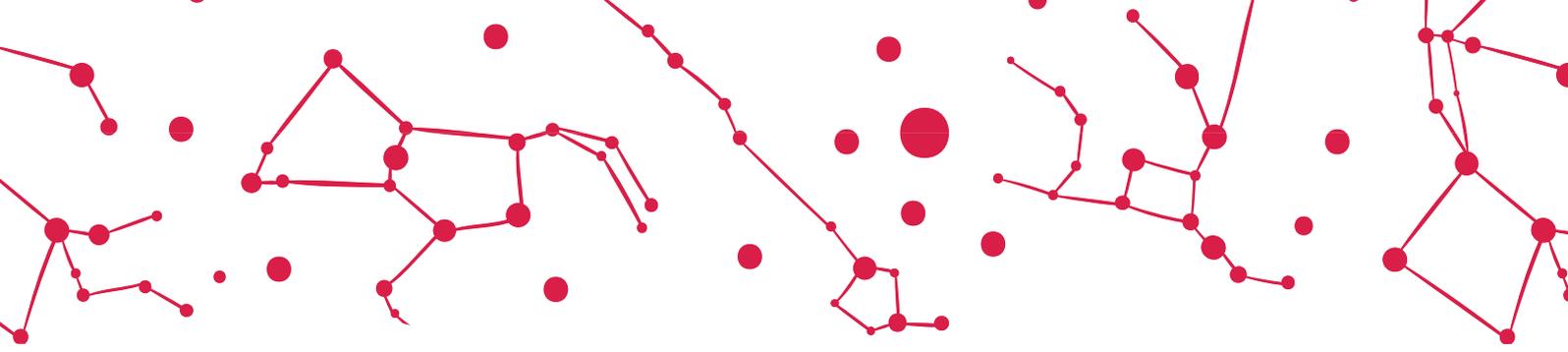
Both, the communities and the volunteers, are prone to face challenges.

CHALLENGES THAT VOLUNTEERS FACE:

- Understanding how organisation functions:** in the beginning of their volunteering experience, it is not easy for the volunteers to understand the core principles of how the organisation functions, what are its informal rules, norms and its work culture.
- Initiating activities:** it is difficult for the volunteers to initiate and implement their own activities which organisations often expect from them.
- Getting locals interested:** when the volunteers start to initiate their activities, they come across challenges trying to get the locals interested in participating in those activities.

CHALLENGES THAT ORGANISATIONS FACE:

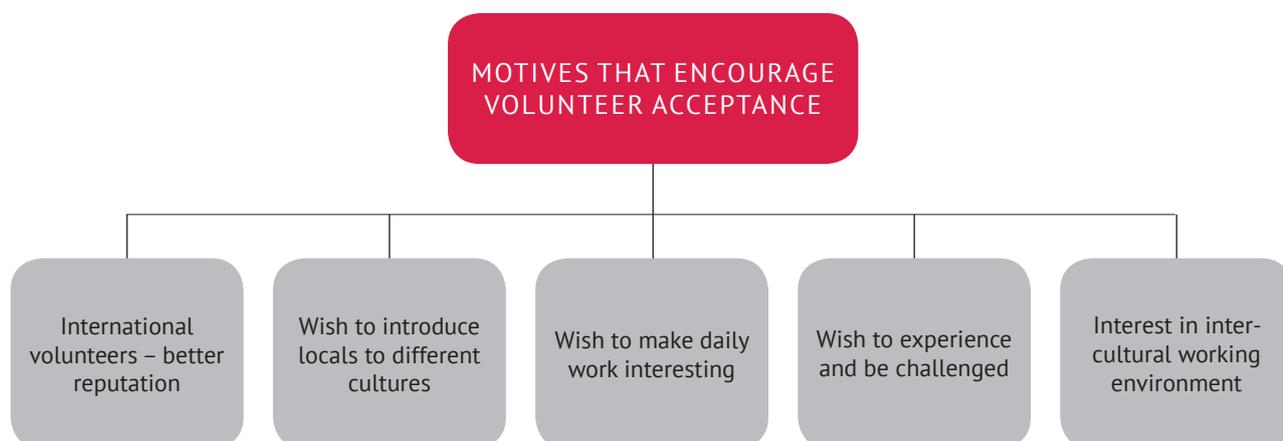
- Understanding volunteer role: guests or employees:** one of the major challenges is to decide on how the role of the volunteer should be understood and, consequentially, how the volunteer should be treated: as a guest, as an employee or as an intern?
- Deciding on volunteer tasks:** due to the uncertainty about the volunteer role in the community, organising their work and assigning them tasks becomes a challenge.
- Assigning monotonous tasks:** communities and organisations get worried about assigning monotonous tasks to the volunteers. It is difficult to find tasks that would always keep the volunteer interested.
- Working on long-term process:** due to the lack of experience of working with the volunteers from abroad, organisations find it difficult to manage the long-term process.



ATTITUDE TOWARDS VOLUNTEERING IS CHANGING, MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE EUROPEAN VOLUNTARY SERVICE BECOMES APPARENT

Community member attitude towards volunteering is changing. In the beginning of the research volunteering was being perceived as a way of helping the organisation to implement their activities and as a tool that assists the visiting volunteers in their personal development. At the end of the research, it was being perceived not only as a way of helping or a personal volunteer development programme, it was seen as an opportunity to learn from other cultures, gain new ideas and transform the established notions.

Motives that encourage volunteer acceptance.



- a. **International volunteers – better reputation:** work with the EVS volunteers adds value to the reputation of the organisation and the community in this way increasing the symbolic community capital.
- b. **Wish to introduce locals to different cultures:** community members wish to gain international experience and expand their cultural capital.
- c. **Wish to make daily work interesting:** communities wish to work with the EVS volunteers because volunteers make their daily work more interesting.
- d. **Wish to experience and be challenged:** community members wish to be challenged and gain new experiences.
- e. **Interest in intercultural working environment:** communities are hungry for the ways to learn about new cultures, they are curious to know different perspectives, gain new ideas and thoughts.

