

Generation Europe Debate

"Volunteerism"

Date: 22.11.2008

Place: Vanadzor

A meeting was organised in Vanadzor city, Lori Region, at the office of the Capacity and Development for Civil Society (CDCS) NGO at which the NGO members, students of Vanadzor State Teacher Training Institute and other representatives of youth organizations were invited.

At the beginning of the meeting a presentation was made about Generation Europe, its activities, goals, mission and vision. The GE web site address was given to the participants so that they could get more detailed information on the organisation and its activities in various countries. The participants were also encouraged to get registered on the website, upload their CVs in the GE database of experts, access the job and internship opportunities available on the GE webpage, read the GE Vibes magazine and take part in the polls and debates. The participants expressed their deep interest in the GE activities and willingness to join the GE community and encourage their friends and colleagues to take part in the polls and debates and voice the views of the Armenian youth.



After the presentation a debate was suggested on the subject of Volunteerism. The discussion was very lively and all the participants actively expressed their views and ideas. Some of the participants argued that the concept of Volunteerism is not yet adequately understood or developed and that volunteer work is not very popular and common in Armenia where, after almost 20 years of transition, people are still struggling to make a living and cannot afford to devote time or effort into volunteer work. While others opposed this view saying that if there is a "will"¹ it is always possible to find time and strength and do something useful for society, for other people, for your community, your city and country.

All the participants were unanimous in their view that it is very important to promote and develop volunteerism in Armenia and that not only the society but also the volunteers themselves will benefit from it; besides being very rewarding, volunteer work also contributes to the development of the individual who acts as volunteer. By doing volunteer work people gain new skills and experience that would definitely benefit them in their future. Reflecting on her volunteering experience, one of the participants (Ani) mentioned: "Sometimes I think volunteer work gave me

¹ In the Armenian language the word 'will' is in the root of the word 'volunteer', literally it's "a person with will"

more that I gave by doing that work. It was an incredible experience that taught me a lot. I learned skills, knowledge and self-confidence, I made new friends, established connections with many organisations..." The CDCS NGO member Arshavir made a short presentation on the European Volunteer Service (EVS) program and volunteering opportunities in other organisations in Europe.

At the end of the debate even the participants who were skeptical about the idea of volunteerism at the beginning of the discussion were enthused and expressed their willingness to become volunteers. The creation of a database of volunteers in Armenia was also suggested. The group decided to continue working on the promotion of volunteerism amongst young people throughout Armenia.

Another meeting was organised on the same day with the Youth Club members in Dsegh village of Lori Marz. After my presentation on Generation Europe, the young people asked me to tell them more about the concerns and problems of the youth in other countries, which I did to the best of my knowledge (drawing extensively on my UK experience, as I lived and studied there for one year), following which a discussion started on the problems of youth in Armenia. The first problem mentioned by the participants was unemployment and lack of jobs in the Armenian towns and villages, resulting in many young people leaving their communities and families in search of a job in the capital city Yerevan or abroad. Another problem mentioned by the young people was lack of information and opportunities to learn and participate in youth projects, trainings and seminars. Absence of internet connection in their village was another issue voiced by the participants, alongside with the need to improve the educational system of the country. Other problems mentioned were absence of a garbage collection mechanism in the village, bad roads, absence of natural gas and adequate heating in schools (most of the people in Armenian villages still use stoves and burn wood for heating), inadequate public transport, and lack of cultural or recreational entertainment and of sport events and activities in the villages.



The discussion on the problems of youth was followed by a heated debate over whether the young people can do something to change the current situation and contribute by making life better in their communities. Can they be agents for change by promoting the development of Armenia? Some of the participants were pessimistic about the future and tended to link everything to money and financial resources. However, the majority of the participants was of the opposite opinion; they were sure that if the young people united their efforts, took some steps towards becoming more active in society, worked to protect their rights, demanded that the

government fulfill its obligations, took more initiative, and were more active, creative, actually DO something instead of complaining, changes would happen. Dsegh Youth Club member Margarita noted that they had already instigated, and achieved, a community clean-up action, a petition for the improvement of transport and for the opening of a new route to Yerevan, and had obtained a positive response to their letter sent to the Ministry of Culture, requesting adequate funding for the refurbishment of the House of Culture in their community. "Changes do not happen overnight; they require planned and consistent efforts"- this was the main idea.

After discussion of the local problems the participants started drawing parallels with the problems of the youth in Europe, and found that many of the problems are shared or at least similar across many countries. They then moved on to discuss more global problems, such as the increasing unemployment as a result of the global economic crisis, migrant workers and their rights, social exclusion, lack of understanding of other's cultures and religions, corruption and environmental problems.

"We are the future of our countries, the future leaders and decision makers; let's not be indifferent, let's unite and act on both local and international levels to address our problems and make our countries, Europe and the world in general, a better place to live"- this is the message of the Armenian youth to their peers in other countries across Europe and the world.