

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH PROJECTS AS A METHOD OF INTERCULTURAL SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reveal the social problems solving possibilities in a frame of European Union international projects and programs, analyse the link between preventative social work and youth work, discuss social worker's or youth worker's role and the relevance of intercultural social work. Analysis of scientific literature is illustrated with the data of empirical qualitative research, which was collected during interviews with 7 young people, aged 19-29 all coming from non-governmental youth organizations located in different European countries (Lithuania, Italy, Poland and Romania). The informants had experience of both participation and project management of international youth projects within the EU programme Youth in action. The results showed in which potential areas international youth projects are relevant regarding social problems of today's youth and addressing them towards positive social change. Results indicate personal and cultural experiences of young people acquired through the participation in international youth projects and the main aspects of why intercultural learning is particularly important in today's young person's life.

Key words: Young people, International Youth projects, the EU programme Youth in action, Intercultural Social work, Intercultural learning

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1. Introduction

A young person today is provided many possibilities to explore other cultures and broaden his or her world view. International youth projects is one of the ways for young people to establish links between their peers living in other countries, communicate with them and recognize existing intercultural differences, learn from their own experience and in this way address their issues of concern as well as develop and grow as individuals. International youth projects encourage the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities, young people's awareness of cultural diversity, aim to prevent and combat prejudices, stereotypes, intolerance, and discrimination towards different social and cultural groups.

Youth workers (*jugendarbeiter* (Ger.), *ungdomsledare, fritidsledare* (Sw.) are being employed in various European youth organisations, youth clubs or youth centres. However in the context of Lithuania, the occupation of youth workers is still in the stage of establishment: in legal documents it was for the first time mentioned 2012 when the Description of Open Youth Centres Action was published by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. The Department of Youth Affairs has implemented the Mechanism of Accreditation for Non-governmental Youth Organisations (hereinafter - NGOs) to certify youth workers. It was the first move towards legal validation of youth work and youth worker training in Lithuania (Accreditation Device, 2010).

Some authors have extensively analysed and studied *youth work ethics* (Banks, 2010), *practical youth work* (Forrest, 2010, Gilchrist, 2010), *intercultural competencies* (O'Hakan, 2007, Stier, 2004), *intercultural communication* (Bremer, 2008, Liu et al., 2011; Neuliep, 2009), etc. Main aspects of *youth work* can be referred to *intercultural social work*, considering that social work with young people does not necessarily focuses on already existing problems of individual, group or community. Social workers analyse and solve client' problems, but their objective is to prevent social problems from occurring and spreading. However, prevention rarely becomes a key component of the social work practice (McCave, Rishel, 2011). Social worker or youth worker can easily adapt international youth projects in their practice in order to tackle youth unemployment, social exclusion, substance abuse and other youth related issues.

The article discusses the social context of international youth projects and aims to reveal the social problems solving experiences of young people, as well as the change of their personal and intercultural competencies. It analyses the ways of how international youth projects experience is related to *preventive social work*.

2. Social Aspects of International Youth Projects

Today in Europe there is a huge range of different international youth programs and projects introduced: International Youth Award (focuses on youth self-development), International Cultural Youth Exchange (enables young people to do voluntary activities and participate in projects abroad), Erasmus (focuses on European student exchanges between institutions of higher education), Erasmus for all, being implemented in Europe in 2014 (which seeks to improve youth skills and personal development, enhance youth employment possibilities), and many more.

Youth in Action (2007-2013) is the Programme of the European Union (hereinafter - EU) which aims "to inspire a sense of active European citizenship, solidarity and tolerance among young Europeans and to involve them in shaping the Union's future" (Program Guide, 2012, p. 5). The Programme promotes mobility within and beyond the EU's borders, non-formal learning and intercultural dialogue, and encourages the employability and inclusion of all young people, regardless of their educational, social and cultural background.

2.1 Young People in EU: Social context

Lithuanian Law on Youth Policy Framework (2003) represents that a young person is a person between the ages 14 and 29, who shall be ensured the equal rights with other young persons and would not be discriminated for reasons of his or his parents' or his other statutory representatives', gender, age, nationality, race, language, religion, convictions, social and financial position, marital status, state of health or any other circumstances. However, certain groups of young people participating in public life, due to the circumstances referred encounter various obstacles, discrimination and violations of their rights and equal opportunities.

Youth unemployment is a particular problem in today's EU, whereas the youth unemployment rate is twice higher than adults (Eurostat, 2013; Salto-Youth, 2009). Youth unemployment rate in Lithuania is among the highest in the EU countries, where challenges are addressed through Lithuanian Labour Office projects, providing tax concessions and soft loans for entrepreneurship activities for young people as well as tax concessions for employers who employ a young person younger than 29 years. However, these measures are insufficient.

The European Commission (2009) adopted the EU strategy for youth policy for the coming decade "Youth – Investing and Empowering", which emphasizes the importance of youth occupation and participation wherefore a significant contribution towards the problem of youth unemployment can be obtained. The Government of the Republic of Lithuania, on the basis of the European experience, identifies open youth centres, non-formal education and the significance of youth work practitioners as relevant approaches to deal with youth unemployment and related issues (LR Government, 2012a; LR Government, 2012b).

Youth social exclusion is referred as the individual or group isolation and particular separation from society on involuntary basis. (Social Work, 2010). Social exclusion among young people is associated with disabilities, educational difficulties, economic and social obstacles that young person confronts and which leads to the greater risk of being socially excluded (European Commission, 2009). Nevertheless, social exclusion shall be perceived in a broader perspective, in the field of international youth projects coherent to inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities.

Young people with fewer opportunities are young people that face situations and obstacles which prevent them from having effective access to formal and non-formal education, international mobility and from participation, active citizenship, empowerment and inclusion in society at large („Inclusion Strategy of the „Youth in Action“ programme, 2007-2013“). The difficulties they encounter are related to discrimination because of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, limited social skills, because they are in a precarious situations, (ex-) offenders, (ex-) drug or alcohol abusers, young parents or orphans. Young people can also have fewer opportunities because they face financial or educational difficulties, are early school-leavers or dropouts, have severe health or psychiatric problems, live in rural or dangerous areas, are descendants from immigrant or refugee families, belong to ethnic minorities, experience linguistic adaptation and cultural inclusion problems, etc. (Programme Guide, 2012).

International youth projects are a realistic way and method dealing with youth social problems. Social inclusion is one of the most important targets of the European Commission strategies and documents shaping European youth policy.

2.2 Programme “Youth in Action”: research data (2013)

International youth projects are relatively new research area in Lithuania. This article represents qualitative research data collected during interviews and group interviews with seven young people between the age of 19 and 29 from Lithuania, Poland, Italy and Romania (paper was carried out January-April, 2013). The

research participants were two females and five males – all of them were youth workers from different NGOs, who had experience of active participation and project management within the EU programme Youth in Action. The interviews represented young people's motives of participation in international activities, social and intercultural experiences acquired, competences and skills gained the possibilities of solving youth concerns associated with social issues, the opportunities of intercultural learning, the role of social or youth worker in the context of international youth projects.

The characteristics of the interview participants:

- 1) Youth worker and university student, who works with young people in an open youth centre. She organises and coordinates international youth projects, sends the groups of young people to be part of international youth projects abroad. The informant has been participating in international activities since 2007 (Lithuania).
- 2) Member of youth NGO and university student. In her practical work, she prepares and sends groups of young people to participate in international youth exchanges abroad. The informant has been involved in international youth projects since 2006 (Lithuania).
- 3) Volunteer, high school student. The informant contributes to the planning and project management of international youth projects in a local youth centre. In international youth activities has been involved since 2008 (Lithuania).
- 4) Youth worker in a youth NGO, university student. The informant works with young people in the area of culture, youth participation. Has been participating in international youth projects since 2006 (Poland).
- 5) Youth worker in a youth NGO. The informant works with young people in the area of art, mostly related to the theatre activities. He has been interested in international youth projects since 2008 (Italy).
- 6) Youth worker in a youth NGO. He works with young people in the area of art, culture, environment, youth training and education. The informant has been interested in international youth projects since 2000 (Romania).
- 7) Youth worker in two youth NGOs. First one is focused on the individual and interpersonal development of young people, the second one – focuses on youth social inclusion and youth participation using art and outdoor activities as the main work method. The informant has been involved in international youth projects since 2007 (Italy).

The very first three informants were introduced about the study by telephone, as well as interviews with them took place in three different times and locations (Lithuanian cities: Lentvaris, Švenčionėliai and Vilnius) agreed in advance. Group interview with informants numbered 4 - 7, took place in an education and training centre situated in a Lithuanian countryside Daugirdiškės, where the EU programme Youth in Action international quality evaluation seminar (within Programme Action 4.3) was organised. All informants were introduced to the research, reported interview duration, ensured confidentiality. Interviews were recorded in the recorder, with the prior to consent of the interview participants.

2.3 The Social Problem-Solving Opportunities

Inclusion is one of the essential priorities of Youth in Action Programme. It aims to strengthen youth participation in decision-making that are important to young people (European Commission, 2007). By enhancing social inclusion, it may be possible to prevent young people from social exclusion and the risk of being at problematic situations. A particular focus of the European Commission is given for the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities, as the participation in international youth projects and programs cannot rely on the educational, social or cultural criteria (Programme Guide, 2012).

International youth projects reflect the theme of social inclusion and can be of two types: those that directly involve young people with fewer opportunities as active participants, and those that deal with the problems of youth inclusion. The second type of projects aims to improve a current situation of young people with fewer opportunities in a society, by involving youth organisations and creating the opportunities for them to share their best practices (European Commission, 2007). Young people are given the opportunity to discuss the issue of social inclusion, using variety of methods talk about healthy lifestyle, creative ways of how to find a job, better understanding of ethnic minorities, tolerance and empathy, promote the employment of young people with disabilities, etc.

Research participants have been also engaged in youth projects in a similar manner:

<My first experience with Youth in Action was my first Eurodesk training course. Since I was a member of Eurodesk, we had some presentations and training courses about Youth in Action Programme, its rules and conditions...> (Poland, n. 4)

<First of all, I started participating in short-time visits of the initial Programme called Youth 2000-2007. It was in Holland and since then everything has started...> (Romania, n. 6)

In this way, youth activities become a tool to enhance the social inclusion of various youth groups.

Programme Youth in Action is an effective tool to contribute and enhance youth employment opportunities (Salto-Youth, 2009). While the experience gained through international youth project does not necessarily mean that all young people can easily find a job or become entrepreneurs, but certain features, knowledge and practical skills that they acquire by participating in international projects or other youth activities may be useful for young people both in the field of employment and entrepreneurship. The experiences of research participants are illustrated by these considerations:

<...you learn how to plan. Starting from little things you start to plan. It's just like projects - you count how much money you will need and how much you are going to spend. It's the same if you create your own business – you plan how many employees you will need, how much you are going to pay for them, what else you are going to buy...> (Lithuania, n. 3)

Managerial competencies acquired during international activities are effectively linked to youth entrepreneurial sensibility and their abilities to start own business. International youth projects do not directly address the youth unemployment issues. It does not necessarily imply that all youth exchange participants sooner or later are going to be employed due to their participation and international experience. However, the experience of participation can contribute to the young person's skills required for a job search, specific knowledge, and perhaps in some cases even in a particular job:

<...it doesn't really mean that young people have to be employed immediately, but you gain specific competencies which motivate you to go forward, try to do something. ...If you are going for the job interview, you can always say that I was organizing and participating in youth exchanges and this experience will definitely return back when you will look for a job in the future.> (Lithuania, n. 2)

The focus on social exclusion is an important component of international youth projects. During international meetings, young people are encouraged to understand other cultures, identify intercultural differences, and in this manner develop the sense of tolerance and combat prejudice, racism which can lead to social exclusion (Program Guide, 2012). Research participants claim that young person participating in international youth activities does not necessarily understand why it is important in his or her project include young people with fewer opportunities. Sometimes even the project coordinators perceive the involvement of young people with fewer opportunities in quite sceptical way, demonstrating it more superficially and most of the time only on the application form.

<...Even if they see youngsters who have fewer opportunities... I am not sure if they really see the importance of involving them. For example, those who do not speak English, those who think are poor... You need to push them forward, and then they say thank you, thank you... Sometimes it takes time... Until they start to understand and this issue grows in them.> (Poland, n. 4)

<...sometimes it happens, that in Romania... young people, who have fewer opportunities are in shame of their situation. They just don't feel comfortable.> (Romania, n. 6)

However, all informants agreed that the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities in their projects always had valuable meaning. They affirmed that the best means to solve problems of social exclusion are participation in voluntary, non-formal education and youth centres activities. Therefore, the inclusion of young people groups with fewer opportunities shall be given more consideration.

<In my opinion, the Programme Youth in Action gives young people an opportunity which they would not normally have. For example I work, let's say with poor youngsters... If we consider their income, then Youth in Action is the only possibility for most of them to go abroad and meet new people and new cultures.> (Poland, n. 4)

Social inclusion is a way to deal with the issue of social exclusion. In accordance with the EU strategy for youth policy 2010-2018, social inclusion is one of the prime concerns for the young people themselves (European Commission, 2009). Social inclusion in the European context is perceived as conditions created for youth participation in social, political and voluntary activities, the possibility to express creative and entrepreneurial ideas, as well as the possibility to contribute to global changes.

3. The Peculiarities of Intercultural Youth Work

Youth work is often defined as the values and ethics-based practice which is one of the fundamental aspects of professionalism (Banks, 2010). In practical social work, the primary values are implied by certain fundamental principles which define the desired social worker's behaviour and moral responsibility (Social Work, 2010). The importance of values in youth work occurs in the situations that require a certain social or youth worker's confirmation if young person's behaviour or actions are acceptable and tolerated. The fundamental ethical standards is the significant element of the whole social work profession, therefore it is also required in work with young people. Social work ethics define the desired employee's relationship with his clients, the profession, colleagues and himself (Social Work, 2010).

3.1 The Role of Social / Youth Worker

In order to work successfully with a group of young people in the field of international youth projects, social or youth worker needs to obtain certain competences and qualifications. All informants referred likewise as illustrated below:

<...if you are inexperienced and unqualified as a social worker, or youth worker... you basically can get into tragedies. Because what happens among young people, it is actually... There are always social processes which are in progress...> (Lithuania, n. 1)

In the practical youth work it is relevant to ensure youth participation and autonomy. According to the European Commission White Paper on Youth, young people today are desired to be heard, and contribute to the construction of Europe (A New Impetus for European Youth, 2001). Lithuanian Law on Youth Policy Framework emphasizes the principle of youth participation, representing that "youth-related issues are solved with the participation of young people and by co-ordinating them with youth or representatives of youth organisations" (Lithuanian Law on Youth Policy Framework, 2006). To achieve this objective, social or youth worker should be able to empower young people to conceive the capacity of decision-making,

respect their right to make decisions, shape the opportunities for young people's learning and personal development (Banks, 2010).

To reach objective of young people's autonomy, social or youth worker is expected to motivate dialogue and provide support. The essence of dialogue indicates that professional should not impose his personal views and opinions, but would be able to listen to another (Weezel et al., 2010). In a dialogue with young people, it is significant to promote their freedom to express different opinion, to encourage the involvement of all participants in the group and their open-mindedness towards distinct thoughts and ideas. Support for young people is referred as common support and encouragement to respect every other young person, to emphasize his or hers individuality and to prevent any form of discrimination (Banks, 2010).

In order to deal with intercultural conflicts, that are often associated with the influence of stereotypes and historical cross-border conflicts, the research participants recommend various sessions and meetings designed for young people where they would be able to share and express their emotions, imaginations, and sometimes false convictions about people from other cultures. Informants reflect on their experiences by giving the following examples:

<...We organise the workshops about stereotypes... For instance, in this youth exchange there will be people from these countries. What do you think about these countries? What kind of stereotypes do you have? ...We are going to the exchange and afterwards we will organise the same workshop. ...We will share our feelings about that country after exchange project and we will check if the stereotypes were true or false....> (Poland, n. 4)

<...talk about stereotypes. Put these topics, sometimes violence, or hidden thoughts to the surface. Also, plan the programme in such a way, that the activities would let young people to express, sometimes even anger that they keep inside...> (Italy, n. 7)

Youth work has several important elements and attributes. Usually various youth clubs and associations are based on voluntary participation, which means that young people can always join and leave from these groups (Gilchrist, 2010). Social or youth worker has to acknowledge that every young person is free to choose to participate in youth organization or not, thus no one can be forced to stay, even if is expected by the social or youth worker. Therefore, youth work is related to the particularity of activities, which should be constructed according to young people's interests, desires, enthusiasm to participate (Gilchrist, 2010).

Non-formal education is essential and dominating learning manner and method within the field of youth work (Gilchrist, 2010). In Lithuanian Law on Youth Policy Framework (2006) non-formal education is defined as a learning method that aims to educate "an intelligent person, capable of responsible and creative resolution of his problems and active participation in public life as well as to develop social competencies of young people". The objective for social or youth worker is to maximize the conditions for young people to be able to interact and discuss with each other, develop mutual relationships in an informal environment, which is one of the substantial principles of non-formal youth education (Gilchrist, 2010). In addition, the implementation of non-formal youth education principles and methods is one of the major Youth in Action Programme conditions (Programme Guide, 2012).

The research data confirmed these contemplations:

<...I have gained so many competencies, as many as I need to become trainer and work at the same youth centre. All I have received was through non-formal education, exchanges, training courses, seminars, etc. If I was a person who wanted to create business, I would be able to do that.> (Lithuania, n. 1)

In order to enhance the social inclusion within the context of international youth projects, social or youth worker's role shall be based on clarification of the certain needs and interests young people might have, on the provision of support, development of young people's competences and potentials, as well as involvement of other stakeholders such as family, school, etc. (European Commission, 2007).

As discussed in section 1.1, the essential youth social problems are associated with youth unemployment, social exclusion and inclusion. The role of social or youth worker is related to the empowerment of young people, in order to motivate their personal changes, to gain new competencies and skills (Perkins, 2009). Young people agree that international youth projects can be a tool which helps to address their concerns.

<Youth exchanges can solve all kind of social problems. Let's take any problem... Youth unemployment, homophobia, bullying... Sexual abuse prevention, alcohol and drugs prevention. It is possible to take any problem and try to solve it in very nice and creative ways for young people... If it was bullying or violence in the family...> (Lithuania, n. 1)

During the implementation of international youth project, it is important for social or youth worker seek youth participation during the whole project time. Thereby young people are given the opportunity to familiarize with the structure of their community, discover possible resources, meet new people, and realize that in complicated situations they will be capable to initiate the change. In a number of cases, social or youth worker shall put only minimal effort to promote youth participation, since active young people in many youth NGOs are already aware that their projects can make a change in their own community:

<...my youth come back here again after exchange, and they write a project, get a grant. Project about bullying. At the same time they arrange peers education, they want more and more of these projects, they keep coming and asking for consultations...> (Lithuania, n. 1)

Working in the community and aiming a social change, social or youth worker shall refer to the organization method, which is associated with the community-based practice, i. e. development of community organizations and empowerment of its members (Pivorienė, 2010 cit. Kahn, 1995). "The objective of community social activities is to improve the welfare of the community through the planned change", while international youth project is usually well planned activity, which has a long-term input and contribution to the local community. International projects for young people are an attractive and interesting way to spend their leisure time in a meaningful manner. It is also facilitating for social or youth worker to motivate young people participate in community activities and contribute to it.

3.2 Intercultural Social Work

The need of intercultural social work arises not only from the context of international youth activities and projects. A constant mobility and movement between countries, people and cultures, is not only European but also a global phenomenon. International social work today is more relevant than it has ever been before (Hugman, 2010). International youth projects deal with youth problems which are often coherent with a variety of social issues. These projects also promote and encourage young people to familiarise with other cultures and thus combat racism, intolerance, xenophobia, foster positive attitudes and approaches.

Research participants agree that international youth projects are in a range of social work profession. However it is appropriate to mention that this approach is mostly acknowledged by the informants who have life or study experience within social work, human rights or other coherent occupations. International youth projects are interpreted and seen as a meaningful tool which can contribute to various youth problems:

<...it is a part of social work, even if you don't understand it at the beginning. It is social work, it is cultural work. I pay a lot of attention to the topic of social work, but... it could also be that somebody doesn't care about it at all...> (Italy, n. 7)

According to the Statistics Lithuania (2012), the ethnic composition of the Lithuanian population includes a variety of cultures – the Poles, Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Jews, Latvians, Tatars, Germans, Roma, and other ethnic groups. Intercultural social work in Lithuania is also of interest, since international youth projects aim to involve young people from different ethnic minorities (Program Guide, 2012). European ethnic composition is more diverse, many societies are multi-ethnic (Wolff, 2008) – in the vast majority of European countries, ethnic minorities constitute at least 20 per cent of the total populations. According to The United States Census Bureau (2010), one third of the state's population is other than white American ethnic group (Humes et al., 2011).

The relevance of intercultural social work is reflected in both national and international legal instruments. It is reflected in the EU Youth in Action Programme Guide that young people participating in international youth projects shall be encouraged to fight against intolerance, discrimination, inequality, xenophobia. Lithuanian Law on Equal Treatment (2003) also declares the implementation of human rights and equal opportunities. Regarding this Law, it has to eliminate any direct or indirect discrimination on the grounds of race, belief, nationality, age, sexual orientation, disability, ethnic origin or religion. In this manner intercultural social work becomes relevant in order to prevent the occurrence of such violations.

Attitudes towards people from other cultures among the public play an important role in the field of intercultural social work. Social or youth worker, who works with young people in international youth projects, shall have an interest and knowledge of public attitudes towards people of other nationalities, as this may have positive or negative associations of young people about their peers from ethnic minorities or different cultural groups. Studies show that the attitudes towards individuals with different cultural background are changing towards more positive direction in Lithuania, the tolerance is growing. However, the most intolerance in Lithuania is expressed towards Jews, Chechens, Roma, Turks, as well as Chinese and Polish nationalities (Radzevičienė, Kantauskaitė, 2008).

The essence of intercultural social work is based on the principle of understanding different culture, and the ability of being culturally sensitive. The relevance of intercultural social work is reflected both in the area of international youth projects and in multicultural today's society (Hugman, 2010). Social or youth worker, working in the field of international youth projects, is required to have profound knowledge about different cultural peculiarities in order to better understand young people from another cultures, as well as help them interpret each other in a correct way.

4. Intercultural Learning

International youth projects promote intercultural learning of young people, which is important component in most of the Youth in Action projects. Intercultural learning is not only the interest of social or youth workers, who want to develop their intercultural competences. Intercultural learning process is encompassing young people too. If there was only one culture, we would not even think of the culture at all. When young people perceive that their culture is not the only one, they proceed to the stage of intercultural learning:

<...new environment, new people, new experiences, new skills. Language training...> (Lithuania, n. 3)
<For me personally, it is huge and always a learning process, it's pushing me forward. ...to create something that could make an impact...> (Italy, n. 7)

Informants confirmed that most of the time the international youth projects coordinators are relating their participation with personal motives, desire to learn, grow and self-realization. On the other hand, they believe that international youth exchanges provide opportunities to gain new skills: by organizing and coordinating international youth projects, they want to make an impact on other young people, contribute to the changes in their community.

The process of intercultural learning requires the knowledge about one's own culture and origins. Intercultural learning can also be a challenge to personal identity, but at the same time can enrich it through cooperation and communication with people from other cultures. Intercultural learning is an individual process, which invites us to learn to live together in a diverse world (T-kit Nr. 4, 2000, Bennet).

Intercultural dimension within Youth in Action Programme is one of the international youth projects conditions. Intercultural dimension should increase young people's positive awareness of other cultures, support dialogue and intercultural encounters with other young people from different backgrounds and cultures, and develop sense of tolerance and understanding of diversity (Programme Guide, 2012). Applying for the international youth exchange grants in the framework of Youth in Action, youth NGO or informal group is obliged to indicate how they will ensure and implement intercultural dimension requirement.

Three informants believe that the ability of better understanding of people from other cultures is the result of the humbled attitude, i. e. to perceive people without any "cultural filters" as "an empty blank sheet."

<...I refuse to look at people using cultural filters. For me it is something that I really try to avoid. All the time. Because it means that if you start with the package of labels, you are always ready to put this label on the people as soon as possible...> (Italy, n. 7)

<For me it is an absolutely empty, blank sheet... You meet a person and then the sheet is filling itself... Here are the Poles, there are Slovenians, I don't even see the difference... There is no point with these stereotypes... Even if you create them, so only now and here, but not for a longer period of time.> (Lithuania, n. 1)

Thus, participation in international youth projects promotes intercultural learning of young people. By communication and development of common activities with people from other cultures they grow as individuals, they better understand other cultures and cultural differences, as a part of intercultural learning. During international youth projects (including all stages of preparation, implementation and evaluation), young people are working in their national and intercultural groups where they have an opportunity to analyse and share their local realities, and in this manner by bringing it back to their communities, contribute to the intercultural learning of local community (Youthpass Guide, 2011):

<First of all, I participated abroad because I wanted to meet new people, new cultures. ...then I started organising back home... I wanted to develop our hometown starting with few different projects...> (Romania, n. 6)

Furthermore, by sharing and comparing their experiences and ideas with their peers living in other countries, young people have the opportunity to take a glance at their personal world view from a broader context. They also develop personal and interpersonal relationships not only with themselves but also with other youth project participants, they discover new ways of looking at the world and perceiving it, they attempt to understand different values, traditions, and develop their understanding of interculturalism (Youthpass Guide, 2011).

<Firstly young people participate in youth exchanges... because of entertainment. Because it is an opportunity to go to another country, and secondly, a good possibility to be without parents – good cover, learning, free country... Afterwards they see, that it is one of the best ways for self-realization...> (Lithuania, Nr. 1)

Tolerance and diversity understanding, that promotes the positive awareness of young people from other countries, is one of the most important principles of the EU program Youth in Action. By creating the conditions for young people to learn in intercultural manner, it is also essential to develop their mutual trust, respect, tolerance, empathy, each participant's self-confidence (Program Guide, 2012). More than 90 per cent of the youth exchange participants agree on the fact that their participation in international youth projects fosters mutual solidarity, tolerance and better understanding of young people from different countries (Ragauskas, Kriauciūnas, 2009). Hence the attitudes of those young people, who have experienced and participated in international youth exchanges, tend to be much more positive and tolerant towards various cultural differences.

5. Conclusion

International youth projects is a part of youth work, wherein both social and youth worker may operate and in the respect of social work ethics and values, encourage young people's participation and autonomy. Using the non-formal education methods, the contribution to youth social problems such as unemployment, social exclusion, exclusion of young people with fewer opportunities and other groups of young people can be pursued. International youth projects, identified as part of youth work, encourage the social inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities, which is closely related to the objectives of social work profession. Social work aims to integrate young people into society, who experience a variety of problems related to their socio-economic status, disability, lack of education, cultural differences, health problems or geographical exclusion. International activities develop young people's active participation in community movements.

International youth projects can be effective intercultural social work area, but it is significantly important to understand the key elements of the intercultural communication. Intercultural communication hazards, such as high levels of ethnocentrism, racism, various inter-cultural conflicts can be resolved only in the acquisition of intercultural competencies. Young people taking part in the international project activities are in a continuous process of intercultural learning. Social or youth worker is recommended to choose and apply the non-formal education methods in such a manner that it can ensure young people's intercultural learning.

During international youth projects young people analyse contemporary youth problems and social issues, both locally and internationally. Youth unemployment which is one of the current youth social problems could be tackled by providing young people with the necessary skills or knowledge required for the future employment. International youth projects contribute to community involvement, allowing community members to get acquainted with other cultures. However, such inclusion can give only short-term results, because this type of work requires constant community consulting and support. In order to reach long-term effects and results, young people should have possibilities and resources to realise and adapt their experiences gained through international youth projects. Young people are provided the opportunity for intercultural learning during international youth projects. Intercultural learning is necessarily in reducing the negative attitudes that young people have towards other cultures, while the position of social or youth worker should correspond to the role of coordinator or caregiver.

To generalize the ideas expressed in this article, it is recommended to perceive international youth projects as the preventative method enabling possible solutions of youth social problems, higher youth occupation. Both youth and social worker are able to work with young people in the field of international youth projects. Therefore, more efforts should be done in the development of this practice within the context of Lithuania. There should be more encouragements made in order to qualify more practitioners workers who would have the capability of working with young people not only at the local level, but also internationally.

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