

EURACADEMY ASSOCIATION 13TH SUMMER ACADEMY REPORT

The 13th Summer Academy began with the ever-popular international dinner, which gave participants a chance to share their national food and drink specialities and get to know each other in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

The topic of this year's academy focused on volunteering and sustainable rural development. Fouli Papageorgiou, President of Euracademy Association, opened the proceedings together with Mr Tivadar Puskas, Mayor of Szombathely and Laszlo Medgyasszay, President of the Hungarian Rural Development Network. They highlighted the vital role volunteers, particularly in remote areas within Hungary but also throughout Europe, can bring to help sustainable rural development.

The academy brought together a total of 37 participants from 11 different countries. For the first time in its history, Euracademy was pleased to welcome a participant from Turkey, Tamir Sermenli, Associate Professor at Mustafa Kemal University, Faculty of Agriculture.

The first presentation was given by Mr Michael Dower, Professor of European Rural Development at the University of Gloucester. He began by offering the following definition of volunteering:

Action taken by a person or group on their own initiative, in what they perceive to be the public interest, without direct financial reward.

Having worked as a volunteer for many years, it was clear to see Michael's enthusiasm for the subject. He described volunteering as a powerful "third sector", alongside the commercial and public sectors, with the potential to greatly contribute to European life. He stressed the importance of suitable mechanisms for volunteering, but also the involvement of "fiery spirits" – local people who are prepared to volunteer within their communities for the common good, thereby encouraging others to do the same.

In her presentation, Urszula Budzich-Tabor, Secretary of the Board of the Polish Rural Forum (PRF), shared the contributions made by PRF to rural development in Poland, including its involvement in rural policy making, expressing the voice of rural stakeholders at national level and facilitating the creation of other rural development bodies. She showcased PRF's methods to ensure local actors get involved (guaranteeing a minimum number of seats for small rural associations, very low membership fees, board meetings open to all members etc.) and pointed out the dilemmas faced by such organisations: how to spread membership evenly, remain politically neutral, develop human resources and ensure financial stability.

Roger Evans of Evanter OÜ gave participants a detailed description of social enterprises and the specific benefits which volunteering can bring to such initiatives in rural areas: active involvement of older members of the community,

increased integration, improvement of the local environment and creation of local jobs. He stressed that good management is essential for social enterprises to work effectively and gave various examples of success stories from the UK in Estonia. He also highlighted the common trend that the more educated a person is, the more likely they are to volunteer.

On the second day of the academy, members of the EU-funded INVOLEN (Intergenerational Learning for Nature Conservation Volunteers - <http://www.involen.eu>) project organised a one-day workshop. Fouli Papageorgiou, who together with PRISMA is coordinating the project, began by presenting the project's key elements – volunteering, intergenerational learning and environmental protection – before explaining the progress made so far. She then handed over to Eleni Kolovou, also of PRISMA, who introduced participants to the notion of location based storytelling, augmented reality and mobile games. She explained how members of the INVOLEN project have been developing conservation based games – aiming to increase the experience of nature in a playful way – together with volunteer students and seniors in the various partner countries.

Other members of the INVOLEN project – Francesca Ugolini, Luciano Massetti, Laura Pellegrino and Graziella Rossini from IBIMET, Italy; Evgenia Panoriou from the Hellenic Ornithological Society, Greece; Elise Gosselin from La Ligue D'enseignement, France; Patricia Honvari from the Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences; and Polona Zevnik from Notranjska Ecological Centre, Slovenia – then provided a more detailed insight into the progress made by the INVOLEN pilot actions within their respective partner countries. In the afternoon session, participants at the summer academy had the opportunity to play a location based game which had been created to showcase the features of the main software used in the pilot actions. They were then asked to develop their own mobile game ideas and share them with the other participants.

Day three of the academy began with a presentation by Christell Åström, Secretary General of the Finnish Rural Policy Committee (FRPC). She highlighted the challenges faced by rural areas in Finland – very low population density, an ageing population, rural-urban migration, lack of citizens' involvement in local democracy. Having said this, she was also keen to point out the tradition of volunteering in the country and the huge financial value of volunteer hours provided by Finnish village associations. Finally, she described the work of the FRPC and its important role in making rural voices heard at the national legislative level.

Next, Ryan Howard, Chief Executive Officer of SECAD Ltd, explained the LEADER programme (http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/leader/en/leader_en.html) and the important role for rural development played by Local Action Groups (LAGs). He stated that, for LAGs to be truly independent, they need multiple funding sources and passionate people who believe in themselves and also the local people. He emphasised the benefits volunteers can bring to LAGs and rural development but warned that responsibilities of paid staff and volunteers must

be clearly defined and that volunteers should not become involved in policy making.

Vanessa Halhead, Coordinator and Director of the European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA) and Director of Scottish Rural Action, then spoke about rural movements in Europe and how those involved are addressing their own futures, supporting local action for local development and celebrating local identity and culture. She made clear that such movements should not focus solely on funding programmes and public authorities, which can change and be annulled at short notice.

The final presentation of day three was given by Demetris Mylonas of PRISMA, who shared case studies involving volunteering from the E-CLIC project: Making Policy Popular through Challenge, Learning, Innovation and Cooperation (<http://www.e-clicproject.eu>). He spoke about the Polystypos Hazel Orchards Trail in Cyprus, where footpaths have been upgraded and facilities such as picnic tables have been built by volunteers. Furthermore, he mentioned the Czech Tourist Club, which has a volunteer network of 1350 people who help maintain the country's network of tourist routes and campaign to prevent projects that will damage the natural environment.

Days 4 and 5 of the academy involved participants visiting a variety of different local development projects, ranging from lace production to caring for the elderly to nature parks, foundations organising art and music festivals, theatre groups, open air museums and many more. On day 6, the participants were asked to produce detailed presentations of their study trips and to suggest improvements to the projects visited. You can access the presentations by clicking [here](#).

On the final of the academy, Gabor Gyorffy of Peregrinus Life offered his take on the role volunteers in Hungary and Central Europe can play to develop community initiatives. He explained the work carried out by the Arkanum Foundation in Hungary and led an interesting discussion with participants. Following the award of diplomas, participants travelled to a local folk fare, where they enjoyed local dance demonstrations and were able to purchase local crafts.

This year's academy was a very intensive but very enjoyable experience and the participants gained a lot of new knowledge from the presentations and informal exchanges that took place. Through the workshops, study trips and various evening activities, many new friendships were also made. We look forward to next year's academy and hope that it will be just as successful!