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## Education through Volunteering: Involvement in a Community Project

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### Abstract

Currently, volunteering represents an important mean of acquiring skills and competencies required by the ever fluctuating demands of the labor market. Although the number of volunteers enrolled in various programs has substantially increased in Romania in the latter years, only a small fraction of these come from the rural areas. At the same time, statistics indicate that a significant percentage of adults from the countryside is represented by unskilled workforce, for whom only two options apply: seasonal agricultural work and unqualified labor in construction. The focus of this study is to propose a program in which people from disadvantage areas can build a house themselves, through volunteer involvement for the less fortunate members of their community, and gain in the process the knowledge and skills that will help them in the search for a job. The project aims at involving adults from rural zones, in the construction of new dwellings for families without shelter. Thus, 3 major aspects were targeted through this eight week project: restoring the sentiment of belonging to a community; the implementation of an ecological construction, easy to build, sustainable and thermally efficient and re-education of the volunteers involved by gaining new skills and competences as well as a professional attestation.

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## 1. Introduction

In Romania, numerous young people from rural areas are registered as inactive in the official statistics, an aspect determined to a great extent by the lack of proper job qualifications that would help in finding better employment opportunities. Traditional activities such as small scale household agriculture no longer seem to appeal to the youth, as the financial motivation is very low in comparison to the expectations of the new "European" wave. The shift in perspective concerning the work values accentuates the gap between generations, fracturing the social fabric of ancestral communities that was netted for centuries on the frame of common grounds regarding work ethics. The educational system doesn't provide a palette wide enough to accommodate all the variables of the labor market. At the same time, in most villages we can account for families or individuals that have lost their homes to natural disasters or that live in houses that have become degraded and which, for various reasons (old age, disability, poverty), they cannot rebuild.

Considering all the aforementioned arguments, the project proposal presented in this paper represents a model for continuing education through volunteering. The project entitled "CA SA AI" (has a double meaning in Romanian, being translated "so that you have" and "to own a home") targets these two major problems: to give young people new opportunities in the work field through better training and the need to provide shelter for disadvantaged families.

## 2. Social and historical context

### 2.1. Aspects regarding employment

One of the major social problems in rural parts of Romania is the high percentage of inactive individuals. Official statistics offer a relative low unemployment estimate, with a national annual rate of 7.00% in 2012 (National Institute for Statistics, 2013), but these data only consider people who unsuccessfully sought a job in the previous 3 months. In reality, the number of inactive persons is much higher, with an occupancy rate of 63.8% among individuals fit to work (ages in-between 20 and 64), almost six percent lower than the governmental target of 70%, set in the context of European Strategy for 2020 (National Institute for Statistics, 2013). The same source indicates slightly higher unemployment rates in rural areas, with the highest number of inactive people among the young (the age group 15 to 24). The most vulnerable category in regard to labour opportunities is represented by individuals with low-level studies (high-school or gymnasias graduates), who register the highest inactivity rates. Thus, it can be argued that this phenomenon is larger due to the lack of employment opportunities and to a lesser extent to the low level of professional qualification. The need to retrain through various forms of professional upgrading or specialization is included in the National Sustainable Strategy 2013-2020-2030, estimating that: in comparison to the 187 thousand participants in reorientation programs in 2004, the number would rise to 360 thousand in 2015. In this framework, the focus of sustainable education will be the pro-active involvement of young generations, especially from rural areas.

### 2.2. Volunteering in Romania

All major components of social interaction, from connectedness, reliance and mutuality among individuals, communities and larger mediums, integration and the sentiment of belonging to a group, benefit from volunteering and have a positive impact on the personal level, through knowledge, education and skill acquirement (Foley et al., 2012). The choice for a volunteering activity is significantly determined by the compatibility with the motivational palette of the individual, the choice being influenced by intrinsic components mostly the share of values within social networks, and extrinsic rewards, especially personal development and future intentions of career advancement (Coursey et al., 2011).

In post-communist Romania, associative values related to volunteering have slowly developed after the mistrust in the force methods and the prohibited participation in civic organizations of pre-89 era. In 2001, the percentage of volunteers in at least one association was under 8%, most of which were highly educated young people from urban areas, in visible contrast to the realities of Western Europe (Voicu, & Voicu, 2009). In recent years, a slight increase

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