

Program Profile: “Foundation for Democratic Youth”

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As Hungary comes into its own as a democracy, the country’s civil society is slowly recovering from the effects of Communist rule, which ended in 1989. However, youth participation in this process lags behind, as memories of the co-optation of youth volunteer organizations under Communism remain strong in the national consciousness and negative attitudes toward civic engagement are the norm among young people and their parents. In order to combat these perceptions and more fully prepare Hungary’s youth to become active democratic citizens, the Foundation for Democratic Youth (DIA, Demokratikus Ifjúságért Alapítványt) was founded in 1999 in cooperation with Youth Service International.

The DIA model takes an interdisciplinary approach to teaching democratic values, blending volunteering, community activities and service-learning to engage young people directly in improving their own communities. The organization focuses on engaging volunteers in rural areas, who have even less access to civil society organizations than their urban peers. DIA aims to support existing local youth volunteer groups, aiding them in their efforts by providing grants, offering trainings, holding conferences, and organizing national and local youth volunteer days. DIA also trains teachers to implement service-learning strategies in their classrooms, and advises professionals on management of effective youth service programs. Additionally, DIA runs several international programs which invite volunteers from other countries to learn about Hungarian civil society and participate in local volunteer projects. Finally, as a member of the International Council of National Youth Policies, the organization hopes to influence public policy, lobbying the Hungarian government to adopt stronger youth service laws and programs.

The following represent a few of DIA’s most innovative current programs:

Self-Starter Fund: Under the Self-Starter Fund, DIA awards small grants to local youth-run volunteer organizations. These grants build capacity of local programs run by and for youth, which often have difficulty securing funding. The process also allows the young program coordinators to practice writing grants, an important professional skill in both the business and non-profit sectors. Previous grant recipients have conducted activities such as restoring playgrounds, collecting clothing for needy families, and making films for local and national TV programs. This project is part of the NOKIA-sponsored Make A Connection Program, run through the International Youth Foundation.

Life Skills for Employability: Launched in January 2006 in cooperation with the General Electric Foundation, Life Skills for Employability is an innovative curricular program which aims to prepare youth for the demands of the modern workplace and ease their transition from school to employment. Focusing on young people from the ages of 13 to 18, the program trains teachers to implement service-learning techniques, making their students more engaged learners and active community members. Seven hundred

students were reached in the initial phase of the program, and an additional 15 schools and 100 teachers have signed up for the semester beginning September 2007, to reach a total of 3,000 students. Preliminary evaluation has revealed that students “enjoyed the program tremendously,” according to DIA Executive Director Rita Galambos, although “community projects are a new concept for teachers.” In response to the difficulty some teachers had in understanding why such an unusual program is necessary to prepare students for today’s job market, the program plans to step up mentoring and assistance to help teachers implement it effectively in the future.

DIA Service Learning Institute: The DIA Service Learning Institute, or DSLI, partners with universities from other countries to create personalized programs which bring foreign students to Hungary to give them a taste of “local Hungarian community life and a democratic society in its adolescence.” Although each program is individually tailored to the needs of the partner university, foreign students typically stay in Hungary for several weeks, participating in service-learning projects such as environmental protection or playing with orphans. Students may also embark on excursions to cultural sites such as historical castles and traditional villages, hear lectures from Hungarian professors, and complete outdoor leadership trainings. This “combination of action and reflection” gives students an interdisciplinary perspective on the importance of youth participation and volunteerism in a young democracy. In meeting local needs and living and working alongside Hungarian youth, the volunteers gain valuable experience in teamwork, creative thinking, and cross-cultural cooperation. Since 1999, DSLI has organized over 20 customized programs for hundreds of students from countries such as the United States, Sweden, Greece, Poland, Ukraine, and the Netherlands.

Conclusion

Since its inception, DIA has engaged over 4,000 young volunteers, who have contributed over 100,000 hours of service to their communities. According to Hayo de Vries, DIA’s Director of Development, “the majority of young people in the network remain involved for at least 2 to 3 years, and after that stay in touch with DIA as alumni.” DIA also administers Global Youth Service Day in Hungary, mobilizing an additional 10,000 volunteers each year since 2006.

The young volunteers certainly appreciate the experience. “Volunteering gives me a chance to realize my ideas while I’m helping others,” says Gyöngyi, one young volunteer. “It gives space for self-realization ... Volunteering brings color into flat weekdays.” Zsanna, another volunteer, explains that DIA is meeting a critical need in Hungary. “It unites those youngsters who want to give something personal to the world and the communities to which they belong,” she says. “I am happy that I can be part of such a community.”