Newsletter

October 2013 **Thematic issue about RIVER project**

Why RIVER?

Volunteering, validation and the Alliance context

In this issue

This thematic issue of Alliance newsletter is entirely dedicated to the project **"RIVER – Recognition of Inter-generational Volunteering Experiences and Results"**.

The main aim of this project, which is funded through the **Lifelong Learning Programme** of the European Commission, is to contribute to the **validation of the learning outcomes of senior volunteering** by developing a complete methodology for the assessment of competences developed during volunteering, a process that can benefit both the volunteers and the voluntary organisations.

Lifelong Learning Programme

The Alliance has been participating together with Lunaria and other voluntary and adult education organisations from Austria, Finland, Germany, Hungary and Italy.

During the last two years, this consortium has been researching, learning, developing and piloting results about the benefits and effective ways of as-

sessing and validating the learning outcomes of volunteering activities on senior volunteers, with a special focus on the inter-generational aspect of volunteering.

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In this newsletter you can find information about the **process** that led to the development of RIVER methodology and the **results** of a two-year joint effort by all involved promoters to contribute to the European framework for the validation of competences.

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As practitioners in the field of IVS, we all know that **volunteering is a powerful educational tool** for volunteers and local communities to interculturality, participation and active citizenship. We see it in our work with the volunteers and the local hosts, during and after the work-camps, and this is also what keeps our motivation alive and makes our network grow every year.

Despite the evidence of these positive effects, it is

often difficult to give the proper visibility and reasoning to such outcomes due to a **lack of efficient and internationally recognized assessment tools**.

Moreover, volunteering is a learning context that can present notable challenges at the moment of validating learning outcomes. According to the Communication of the European Commission, "*Voluntary activities can form either structured learning activities (so-called non-formal learning) in which the volunteer intentionally participates or unintentional and unstructured learning (so-called informal learning).*"

(Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering, European Commission, COM (2011) 568).

In Alliance main IVS activities, the workcamps, both forms of learning happen: some basic objectives are very clear in our mind when organizing the workcamp and preparing and supporting the volunteer, especially in the framework of A4A, so that we can partly speak about a structured **non formal learning**.

At the same time, collective and multicultural life often generates for the volunteers unexpected learning achievements →

→ that highly enrich their experience. In this sense, an important component of workcamps is the **informal learning** process that takes place and its results.

When evaluating, we need to have an initial reference or objectives, upon which, at the end of the volunteering activity, we assess the level they were achieved.

This becomes particularly difficult in an informal setting like the workcamp, where learning comes often unexpectedly and,

even more, what is to be assessed are the so called "**soft skills**": team work, intercultural communication, problem solving, autonomy etc.

How can we ensure objectivity? How can we support the volunteer's improvement without "testing" him/her? How can we guarantee the validity of the assessment results?

A flexible, tailor-made and professional approach to evaluating and recognizing the learning outcomes of volunteers is needed, applicable to the big variety of volunteering settings existing and adaptable to the needs and characteristics of individual volunteers.

By participating in RIVER, the Alliance had the occasion to contribute in first hand with our 30-year-long experience, to fill this current gap and develop a useful and comprehensive methodology.

RIVER can bring **interesting perspectives** to the Alliance future actions in fields like the Accessing campaign or the quality and impact of IVS projects.

Together with other international projects such as "ImpACT" (CCIVS) and "Changing Perspectives" (from the Impact questionnaires of "Go for the NEETs" EVS), is an important step for the Alliance towards **stronger support measures for volunteers and the international recognition of IVS**.

What is RIVER project?
Aims and target groups

The original idea of the EU-project RIVER raised from the focus of the European Year of Volunteering 2011 combined with the European Year of Active Ageing 2012.

Given the demographic trend and the increasing number of elderly people in Europe, it seems even more crucial to **create opportunities for elderly to stay active**.

Involving a larger number of seniors in voluntary work might turn out to be a major tool in active ageing strategies while on the other hand the increasing involvement of senior people in volunteering is essential for the vitality of the voluntary sector.

Following these two principles, the RIVER project **aims** at:

- making the learning benefits of senior volunteering activities visible;

- developing and testing a validation system for senior volunteering integrated in the planning of the volunteering activity;

- providing and improving learning opportunities for the increasing number of senior citizens in Europe;

- motivating older people to engage in senior volunteering as a learning experience;

- promoting intergenerational learning.

The initial **target groups** of RIVER are voluntary organisations and networks, adult education providers, decision-makers in local, national and European authorities which (might) provide funding for senior volunteering and last but not least senior volunteers.

Nevertheless, along the process we understood that **the benefits of validating learning outcomes in volunteering through RIVER, go further beyond the senior sphere!**
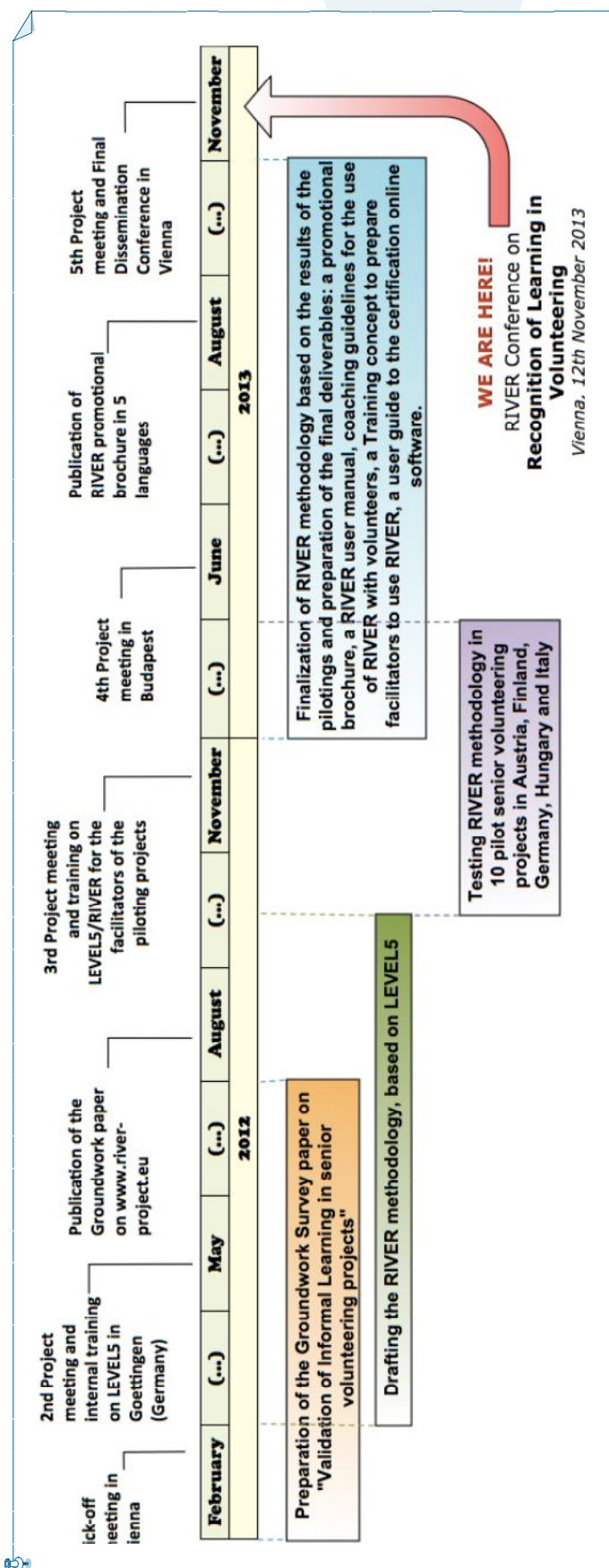
They well apply to other sectors of society, including first and foremost **young people**. For this reason, it was agreed that the final RIVER methodology can be used with volunteers from any age and socio-cultural background.

The partners involved in RIVER

Die Berater (coordinator, Austria) ∗ Budapest Cultural Centre (Hungary)
Bupnet (Germany) ∗ CSVnet (Italy) ∗ Kamut (Finland) ∗ Lunaria (Italy)
Research Institute of the Austrian Redcross ∗ Alliance

What is RIVER project?
The Process and the Results

Timeline (left diagram):

2012 — February | (...) | May | (...) | August | (...) | November | (...)

2013 — February | (...) | June | (...) | August | (...) | November

- Kick-off meeting in Vienna
- 2nd Project meeting and internal training on LEVEL5 in Goettingen (Germany)
- Publication of the Groundwork paper on www.river-project.eu
- 3rd Project meeting and training on LEVEL5/RIVER for the facilitators of the piloting projects
- 4th Project meeting in Budapest
- Publication of RIVER promotional brochure in 5 languages
- 5th Project meeting and Final Dissemination Conference in Vienna

- Preparation of the Groundwork Survey paper on "Validation of Informal Learning in senior volunteering projects"
- Drafting the RIVER methodology, based on LEVEL5
- Testing RIVER methodology in 10 pilot senior volunteering projects in Austria, Finland, Germany, Hungary and Italy
- Finalization of RIVER methodology based on the results of the pilotings and preparation of the final deliverables: a promotional brochure, a RIVER user manual, coaching guidelines for the use of RIVER with volunteers, a Training concept to prepare facilitators to use RIVER, a user guide to the certification online software.

WE ARE HERE!
RIVER Conference on **Recognition of Learning in Volunteering**
Vienna, 12th November 2013

RIVER builds on the results of previous initiatives and EU funded projects, among which:

- **LEVEL5** (vip-eu.org), a comprehensive methodology for assessing and validating competencies acquired in informal learning settings, developed and managed by the **REVEAL** community (reveal-eu.org) through a series of projects funded through the Lifelong Learning Programme. This system-approach provided the backbone for the development of RIVER methodology, a further adaptation to the needs of the volunteering sector.

- The experience of SEVEN – Senior European Volunteers Exchange Network

- SLIC I and II, about the activation of elderly citizens through their involvement in informal and non formal learning activities.

- Many initiatives and good practices deriving from the expertise of all partners in the interrelated fields of volunteering, adult education and learning assessment.

These are the documents and **guiding tools** produced along the project to guarantee a user-friendly approach to RIVER methodology and an adequate promotion:

➲ **Groundwork survey** on the "Validation of informal learning in senior volunteering projects"

➲ **RIVER users' manual** with detailed instructions for those working with volunteers, so called "facilitators" (mentors, social workers, leaders etc.)

➲ **Coaching guidelines** to help the volunteering facilitators to provide volunteers with necessary information on RIVER approach and procedure

➲ **Training concept**: a concise and complete guide to train facilitators in applying RIVER with volunteers

➲ User guide for the certification software linked to LEVEL5

➲ **Promotional brochure "Revealing the learning potential of volunteering":** it presents the context in which the project activities were developed, and examines some samples of practice from the piloting phase of the methodology.

All the main products are available in English, German, Italian, Finnish and Hungarian and downloadable from www.river-project.eu

This approach and procedure, that is the one of LEVEL5 system, is composed of 3 dimensions, 5 levels and 5 steps.

Three dimensions are taken into account when assessing the volunteer's competences:

- Cognitive (knowledge oriented) dimension
- Active (activity oriented) dimension
- Affective (emotion oriented) dimension

The three dimensions are organised in **five levels**, which are the measure scale for the development of the competences of the volunteer.

The process is made up of **five steps:**

STEP 1 - Describing the project or volunteering activity, which will be the learning setting.

STEP 2 - Selecting one or more competences to be assessed and creating an inventory, according to the volunteer's interests and the evaluator's advices.

STEP 3 - Taking an existing reference system or adapting it for every competence chosen. A reference system includes for each level in each dimension:
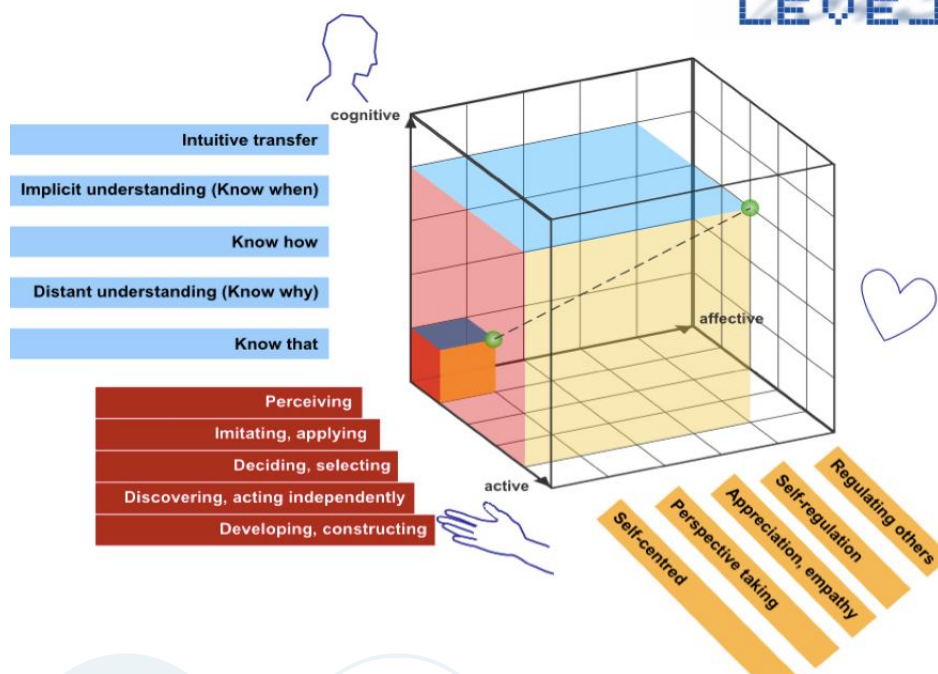
- a title
- an explanatory description
- indicators to assess whether that level was reached by the volunteer.

STEP 4 - Assessing twice: before and after the activity. RIVER partners have identified and created a set of methods that have worked well with volunteers, ranging from self-assessment to peer assessment or observation by the evaluator.

STEP 5 - Rating, reasoning, documenting, certifying (for each competences chosen at step 2). It implies:

- choosing, for each dimension, the level (initial and final) of the volunteer's competence, based on the indicators set at step 3;
- writing down reasons for this rating;
- describing the volunteer's learning process;
- creating the certificate using the existing software or templates (1 certificate for each competence).

What matters is the progress made by the volunteer in that specific competences through the volunteering activity, not how high is the level finally reached

Main benefits of RIVER

as identified in the piloting phase

For the volunteer

- Learning development is recognized and learning benefits of volunteering are made visible
- Learning development can be evidenced and acknowledged through certification
- For senior volunteers, certification shows the value which is given to their volunteering engagement.
- For young volunteers, certification can be used for specific purposes, like applying for a job or studying opportunity.
- Motivation and commitment for future volunteering involvement can be increased

For volunteering organizations

- Reflection is given as an added element of the volunteering activity
- Project planning can be improved.

- Knowledge about competence development can be transferred to other contexts
- Recognition of informal learning results of volunteering increases motivation and commitment of volunteers
- Stronger recognition towards institutions and decision-making bodies, but also to attract more volunteers.

Do you want to try RIVER out ?

As partner of the project, specially involved in the Exploitation phase, the Alliance and its members have the right to use RIVER methodology and the products of the project.

This means that **all members have the possibility of applying this methodology with their volunteers, whether young, adult or senior!**

The manual with detailed step-by-step description of the procedure, the methods and the reference systems of the competences, is freely downloadable from RIVER website and usable, like all the other supporting tools already mentioned.

If you wish to apply the methodology and issue a final certificate with the visualization of the learning progress as in the picture of page 4 (a sample can be viewed in the RIVER manual), you should address the Alliance. The **access through the Alliance to the certification software**, which has been created and is managed by the European network blinc eG/REVEAL, **is open for all members from January til December 2014.**

For more information contact the Alliance Secretariat at alliance@alliance-network.eu

Useful links

Information, activities and downloadable products about RIVER project and RIVER methodology
www.river-project.eu

General description about RIVER project on Alliance site
www.alliance-network.eu/index.php?page=river

About LEVEL5 approach and procedure
vilma-eu.org/index.php?id=13

Study on Volunteering in the European Union (EACEA, 2010)
ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/doc1018_en.pdf

Communication on the recognition and promotion of volunteering in EU (EU Commission, 2011)
ec.europa.eu/citizenship/pdf/doc1311_en.pdf

Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Council, 2012)
eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2012:398:0001:0005:EN:PDF

More about policies on validation of learning outcomes by the European Commission
ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/informal_en.htm

Lifelong Learning Programme

Youth in Action

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