

European Inventory

on validation of informal and
non-formal learning



Case Study: *Child Line (Vaikų linija)*, Lithuania

1.1 Voluntary work in Lithuania

According to the latest EU survey¹, active participation in voluntary work in Lithuania is among the lowest in the EU, with only 11% of the population participating in voluntary activities (the lowest percentage is in Bulgaria – 10%). The EU25 average is 34% and in countries such as Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Finland the level is far above the EU average with 60%, 55%, 53%, 52% and 50% respectively.

Among the main obstacles preventing an increase in participation in voluntary work in Lithuania (as well as in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe) is the lack of cooperation infrastructure between the public and third sectors, the unclear legal regulation of voluntary work and especially the lack of trust in NGOs, voluntary organisations, charities and the third sector in general by the public bodies. This lack of trust can partly be explained by the absence of volunteering traditions in Lithuania and also by the unfavourable historic experience, when non-governmental organisations were treated as either a threat to the then political system and therefore prohibited or subordinated to enforce that system.

Thus, compared to the countries where validation initiatives to identify, assess and recognise the knowledge, experience and skills acquired through informal and non-formal learning are used more widely, Lithuania's third sector is still only at the initial stage, with scattered and single pilot initiatives. All of these initiatives are so far limited to internal use and are aimed at contributing to personal development and the development of the organisation in which the person is employed, rather than to facilitate the mobility of workers between organisations of the same kind. Facilitating mobility within the third sector, attracting more people to voluntary work and raising the profile of the third sector still remains potential for the future.

1.2 *Child Line* - Background

Child Line is an example of a bottom-up initiative within the third sector, which has been developed in response to an identified need. The initiative demonstrates how bottom-up initiatives can be initially limited in terms of transferability. It also shows the limitations which arise from a lack of public sector involvement and/or links to formal qualifications or

¹ Eurobarometer. *European Social Reality*. Special Report for the European Commission. February 2007. Retrieved September 12, 2007, from http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_273_en.pdf.

standards frameworks. However, it also shows how bottom-up initiatives, delivered 'on the ground' are centred on the needs of the individuals and the organisation in question.

*Child Line (Vaikų linija)*¹ is a national non-governmental and non-profit organisation delivering a free counselling and psychological support service for children and teenagers in Lithuania by telephone, post, and e-mail. *Child Line* has three main offices which are located in the three largest cities of Lithuania: Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipėda, as well as three regional offices where counselling and psychological support is delivered via internet only – in Šiauliai, Panevėžys and Kuršėnai. In addition to its main activity of providing psychological support, *Child Line* also aims to influence decision-making and the state policy on children's key problems by organising nation-wide campaigns, conferences, events and seminars and via stakeholder participation.

The initial roots of the organisation can be found within the *Youth Line* Youth Psychological Aid Centre (YPAC)². This was the first Lithuanian voluntary telephone psychological aid service, established in Vilnius in 1991, just after the country's independence from the Soviet Union. An independent operation of *Child Line* started in Vilnius in September 1997, offering anonymous and confidential counselling and psychological support via telephone to children and adolescents within the Vilnius region. In December 1999 the Educational Psychological Agency in Klaipėda (the third largest city in Lithuania) joined *Child Line* and established its office in Klaipėda. An office in Kaunas (the second largest city in Lithuania) was established in January 2000.

At first, *Child Line* offered its services only by phone. Later the services were expanded by offering three forms of nationally accessible free help – support by telephone via a joint (since May 2004) telephone number (from public and home, as well as mobile phones) and assistance by post and the internet since April 2004.

Child Line delivers psychological support using specially trained consultants. In 2007, of the total number of 78 consultants across the country (41 in Vilnius, 31 in Kaunas and 8 in Klaipėda) 70 worked on a voluntary basis³. Klaipėda *Child Line* is located within the Educational Psychological Agency and the eight consultants working there are professional psychologists employed by the Agency.

About 60% of all volunteers are university students with an average age of between 19 and 30. Most are studying psychology and social work, but there are several students of economics, medicine, law and natural sciences. There is a mix of first year students as

¹ Official website: <http://www.vaikulinija.lt/>.

² *Jaunimo Linija Jaunimo psichologinės paramos centras* - JPPC

³ *Child Line Annual Activity Report 2006*. Retrieved 1 October, 2007 from <http://www.vaikulinija.lt/files/2006%20m%20%20vaiku%20linijos%20ataskaita.pdf>.

well as postgraduates. The remaining volunteers consist of employed young people (about 30%) and middle-aged non-working mothers (10%). 90% of all volunteers are female, which may be because work with children is more attractive to women than men, or because men feel stronger financial pressures and therefore have less intentions and time (if at all) for voluntary work.

In 2006, *Child Line* answered 87, 079 calls from a total number of nearly four million attempts to call the organisation, with an average of 240 calls a day. (This large number of unanswered calls is usual for psychological support phone services for children, as many of them are making only short 'check' calls without intending to talk. On the other hand, there is a lack of capacity within the organisation to answer all of the 'real' calls.) In 2006 *Child Line* received 1,381 emails, with an average of 115 emails a month.

Special funding to cover call expenses is provided by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Other financial resources are received mainly through sponsorship of separate initiatives, for example the "Stop Bullying" campaign for schools, and is given on an ad hoc basis by the private sector, municipalities, other public bodies and international entities operating in Lithuania (e.g. diplomatic missions resident in Lithuania, Nordic Council of Ministers, British Council etc) as well as from individual private donations.

Volunteer work within the organisation is the main enabler to deliver its services. Depending on the qualification level and work experience of a volunteer, his / her job includes:

- direct provision of counselling and psychological support by phone, post or internet to children and teenagers calling *Child Line*;
- sharing working experience with new volunteers (trainees) by participating in their initial training and contributing to it;
- providing supervision and regular feedback to the volunteers with less work experience or mentoring and supervising group seminars for trainees or consultant-volunteers;
- and contributing to the regular updating and development of the education and training programme used within the organisation.

1.3 Use of validation by Psychological Telephone Help Service Agencies

Assessment of competences, knowledge and skills acquired within informal and non-formal learning settings is carried out in one or another way by most of the 20 member agencies of the Association of Psychological Telephone Help Service Agencies in Lithuania. Agencies that rely on volunteering work in order to deliver their services are particularly active in the assessment of informal and non-formal learning. This is due to the nature of the work involved. Volunteers usually come from a variety of different backgrounds and have different personal and educational experiences. They are not required to have any specific / formal qualification in order to start work within an organisation - instead initially they are required to have "suitable" personal features and competences that correspond to the service field. In the case of *Child Line* these are for example a wish to help others, sympathy, intuition on how to make initial contact with a child and how to communicate with them, to be non-judgemental and tolerant to different lifestyles and behaviours, etc. Career progression is also usually related to the length of work experience within the organisation, rather than the possession of formal education certificates.

Therefore an initial assessment of the individual's competences acquired in different settings (for example, family, community life, individual experience etc.) and through non-formal learning is very important in order to determine an individual's suitability for the roles involved. Other methodologies are developed with the aim to facilitate career progression of the volunteers that are interested in and are suitable for further development.

1.4 Use of validation by *Child Line*

Child Line is constantly looking for new volunteers and the agencies in Vilnius and Kaunas place considerable importance on the selection and further development of the volunteer consultants. Validation methodologies have been designed to assist the recruitment process and to allow further regular assessment of the competences the volunteers acquire through work experience within the organisation.

1.4.1 A multi-level approach

Vilnius *Child Line* uses a so-called 'multi-level approach' in order to identify, assess and validate volunteers' competences, knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning as they work within the organisation. This approach was developed in-house, mainly due to the lack of knowledge and knowledgeable leadership. No standards have yet been developed for the voluntary sector, either at national or sectoral level.

The stages of the multi-level approach are:

- Pre-start stage – identifies a volunteer’s suitability for the work the *Child Line* carries out,
- Initial stage – the assessment is carried out during and at the end of the preparatory training (followed by the Volunteer Consultant Certificate that is so far officially recognised only by *Child Line*) as well as after the volunteer starts to provide independent but supervised consultations to the *Child Line* callers;
- Continuing stage - an assessment is carried out regularly during the contract period (currently between 300-350 hours). A volunteer has an obligation to work for *Child Line* after successfully completing the eight months of preparatory training in order to monitor the quality of the services provided by a volunteer and to provide support if it is needed;
- Advanced stage– facilitates the individual’s career within the organisation after the obligatory contract period (if a volunteer wishes to do so) and contributes to the development of the organisation itself;
- Thank You Certificate – granted by the *Child Line* after finishing work within the organisation. Officially it is only recognised within the branches of *Child Line*, but unofficially it gives an advantage when seeking employment in other organisations of a similar kind (although this is still a relatively limited context).

1.5 Validation in use at the Vilnius and Kaunas *Child Lines*

As we have seen, *Child Line* has developed a validation system that assists in evaluating initial personal suitability and further “growth” (career development) for volunteers within the organisation. This validation system covers several competence levels. Although the identification, assessment and recognition of different competence levels is mainly linked to the volunteers’ work experience within the organisation, the process also takes into account other settings where particular personal features especially desired by the organisation can be developed, e.g. community work, other voluntary and family activities, personal interests etc. This is mainly done by a colleague with longer work experience (mentor) via observation and helps to decide whether a person is suitable for a further career within the organisation, if he or she wishes to do so.

1.5.1 Selection of volunteers

The selection procedure of potential volunteers is especially oriented towards their personal learning within non-formal and informal settings. The procedure is based on internally-developed standards and aims to identify their personal competences such as work motivation and its adequacy (e.g. wish to help others or solve their own problems etc), communication skills, self-reflection, empathy, tolerance, acceptance of different life styles and behaviour, emotional balance and sense of social boundaries etc. The procedure was developed over time and allows identification of the above personal features that are required by the work.

Initially, the selection process involved a written test. Later, after sharing experiences with other organisations of a similar kind, both national, e.g. *Youth Line*, and international, e.g. Swedish and Welsh *Child Lines*, the written test was replaced by a process of observation during a structured individual interview and evaluation of a candidate's responses to particular situations. This change was made in order to improve the assessment of the candidate's communication skills, emotional intelligence and the adequacy of reaction, all of which are very important for the work carried out by *Child Line*.

Successful candidates are enrolled on the initial *Child Line* training course. A further progress assessment is carried out during and at the end of this preparatory training by a training course mentor. At the end of the training course a certificate stating the subjects that a person has studied during the course is granted by *Child Line*, allowing the individual to commence work within the organisation.

The 100-hour training course lasts approximately eight months. This course aims to develop basic consulting skills with children and teenagers by telephone, mail and internet. The training is specific and corresponds to the needs of the organisation, for example how to behave in specific consulting situations with an aggressive child, when a child is not motivated to receive help, how to talk to abused children or children who are going through bereavement, etc. Following the initial training, the volunteers receive a 'volunteer consultant' certificate that allows them to commence work in the organisation.

The main competences which the preparatory training aims to develop in an individual are:

- ability to contract the initial contact,
- skills of active listening and questioning,
- empathetic attitude,
- setting and keeping the boundaries of consultation,
- objectiveness,
- conversation structuring and purposive directing
- skills to conclude the conversation appropriately.

These are assessed by a mentor observing the trainees during their practical sessions, using an evaluation sheet with grades from 1 “not capable” to 5 “comfortable”. However, the certificate provided at the end of the preparatory training only states the time period training sessions were attended and the subjects studied and does not refer to the level of attainment or skills and competences developed. This is partly because there are as yet no common standards and procedures on how to do this.

1.5.2 Ongoing Assessment and Career Development

Approximately the first ten hours of initial consultation after completion of the preparatory training course are supervised and observed by a colleague with at least four months work experience, where feedback is provided immediately. Besides the competences listed above, additional skills are evaluated such as:

- the ability to extract the main aspects of the conversation
- the ability to talk directly about the problems of the person calling the *Child Line*,
- to recognise critical situations,
- estimation of life-threatening risk and
- ability to describe the conversation.

After this, systematic supervision is no longer carried out but regular feedback is provided through:

- ad hoc observations by more experienced colleagues (by those with at least three to four months of practical work experience);
- monthly meetings / special qualificatory seminars (where e.g. a volunteer presents a specific situation from his/her working practice and discusses it with other colleagues / a more experienced member of staff);
- individual meetings with a supervisor (usually qualified and well-experienced psychologists) to discuss work issues and satisfaction and personal emotional state etc.;
- theory sessions every other month and the chance to share experiences with colleagues from other national organisations and international partners at a large two- to three-day annual event.

A new method was introduced recently in order to assess individual competences in providing support via the internet. Responses provided by the volunteers by email are reviewed on a regular basis and feedback provided. The main responsibility for the

assessment and learning lies with internal experts and well-experienced voluntary staff and are based on internally agreed standards on internet consultation.

More advanced methods are in place to facilitate further career development within the organisation for those volunteers who wish and are suitable and available to take part in further development after completion of the obligatory contract period. An individual learning and assessment pathway can lead to the position of:

- Junior supervisor – a volunteer consultant who is learning to provide supervision, i.e. learning how to facilitate practical sessions for the trainees of the preparatory course by observation of work of more experienced supervisors and facilitating them with their supervision;
- Supervisor – a person who facilitates practical sessions for the trainees during their preparatory course, provides expert assistance for the volunteer-consultants as well as facilitating regular meetings with them, participates in the selection procedure of new volunteers and after gaining considerable work experience supervises junior supervisors.
- Junior training mentor – a *Child Line* supervisor who takes part in the delivery of the preparatory training for future consultants and who is learning to facilitate group sessions by observing the work of a more experienced colleague and by facilitating them independently but with the supervision of a mentor.
- Training mentor – a supervisor qualified for facilitating a group session (theory and practical) for the members of a preparatory training course as well as volunteer-consultants (a case analysis session and other qualificatory seminars). They also participate in the development of the training material and can supervise junior training mentors.

1.5.3 Methodologies

The initial volunteer selection procedure in particular takes into account a wide set of competences that have been acquired through community, voluntary and family activities etc. Later, assessment mainly refers to the competences acquired through the work experience and learning within the organisation.

Due to difficulties in portability, the methodologies were usually developed in-house, with some external contributions from (e.g. sharing experiences, as in the case of the change in selection process used) other agencies of a similar kind. The *Child Line* Kaunas office is

the only one which worked in partnership with other agencies of a similar kind. The responsibility for development of the methodologies is mainly assigned to in-house experts. As these experts work closely with other volunteers of the organisation and because they in most cases continue to provide counselling and psychological support services, direct and regular input is provided from the whole organisation. Many of the now senior experts within the organisation have working experience and have retained close links with the people working at the *Youth Line* (which was a mother organisation for *Child Line*) and therefore some sharing of experiences in developing methodologies is (also) ongoing between the agencies.

All assessment that is available after completing the preparatory training and gaining substantial work experience during the obligatory contractual hours, is of free choice of the volunteer. Its primary aim is to facilitate the individuals' career within the organisation if s/he wishes and is suitable to do so. The assessment is delivered informally (i.e. via mentoring and help from more experienced colleagues) rather than during formal procedures. For the same reason, more experienced colleagues, rather than external experts, are the main assessors. This is due to the lack of specially trained assessors and agreed methodologies. Financial constraints are also encountered. The validation process facilitates the identification of individuals' experiences, knowledge, skills and competences which can be used later, both in their work and for knowledge-sharing with less experienced volunteers. As the organisation remains relatively small and individual career progression is linked to "growing" within the organisation, the portfolio method, observation and simulation, together with evidences extracted from work, are the main methodologies used by the *Child Line*.

1.6 Outputs and Outcomes

It is clear from the description of the main roles within the organisation that many skills and competences can be developed through volunteering for *Child Line*. The methods developed in-house for identifying and evaluating individual skills, knowledge and competences gained thorough *Child Line* work experience are already in place and give a possibility for their accurate assessment. However, methods of validation and wider recognition still need further development.

Currently there are limitations to the benefits individuals gain from the validation processes used by *Child Line*. The certificate provided at the end of the preparatory training states only the time period training sessions were attended and the subjects studied. A similar description is contained in the 'thank you' certificate that is granted when a person finishes his / her work for *Child Line* (i.e. the time period the person was working in the organisation and the training courses he or she has attended). The certificates do not

clarify the skills and competences an individual has developed, nor the level of these skills, except (on the occasions) when requested by a volunteer. This is mainly due to the lack of agreed standards on how to describe them. Moreover, for the same reason the certificates are only formally recognised among the branches of *Child Line*, but not among other organisations providing similar services, for example *Youth Line*. Informally they are however taken into consideration and give great advantage. All in all, they are still limited and do not exploit the full potential of a description of the competences a volunteer has gained through the working experience. Such a description could contribute to or facilitate his / her later employability in this or other sector.

Taking into account the identification, assessment and validation of skills, competences and knowledge acquired through non-formal and informal learning are still very rare in Lithuania but most employers do recognise the positive impact that this validation could bring. For example, if a person applies for a job, simply stating the formal certificates and diplomas they have attained is not considered to be enough, as they do not necessarily show individual competences and especially how a person can apply them in practice. Instead some kind of a statement provided either by a previous employer or independent assessor would considerably add credibility, compared to the present process when a person is asked to do that her/himself.

The positive outcomes of the validation process for the *Child Line* volunteers could therefore be further enhanced by developing the tools used for the validation process. According to the volunteers themselves, this could even more contribute to their self-confidence, increased motivation, attract more people to volunteering and especially show the value of knowledge, competences and skills that the practical work can give. The latter is especially relevant for the *Child Line* volunteers as the majority of them are students that find great competence development benefits of their work in *Child Line* in addition to their formal studies, in particular for students studying psychology and social work. However, the majority of the higher schools and other education and training providers in Lithuania are not willing to appreciate and recognise this by developing their own procedures / methodologies for recognising / validating non-formal and informal learning. This can be explained by the inflexibility and unwillingness of the providers of formal education (and especially higher education providers) to lose their monopolistic status.

For *Child Line*, there are significant benefits to the use of the assessment processes. The use of the procedures for recruitment and further development of the volunteers ensures that the organisation is able to match 'the right person to the right job' and to optimise the use of the skills and competences available within its workforce. The use of a formal method to recognise the skills and competences developed through volunteering, together

with the opportunities to develop further throughout the volunteers' 'career' with *Child Line* means that the organisation may benefit from increased appeal to potential volunteers.

1.7 Sustainability and Mainstreaming

Although these volunteering organisations carry out validation activities in their every-day practice, none use the terminology "identification, assessment and validation of knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal educational settings". Moreover, so far, every organisation within the Association of Psychological Telephone Help Service Agencies in Lithuania uses its own methodologies and methods, which tend to be developed 'in-house'. The methodologies are sometimes developed by consulting with other organisations of a similar kind (either national or international) or otherwise simply by relying on the professionalism and experience of the people within the organisation. The Association of Lithuanian Psychological Telephone Help Service Agencies is providing essential stakeholder representation at the higher decision-making / policy levels, but there are no initiatives yet to develop validation methodologies that might be relevant for the sector as a whole.

It can therefore be suggested that *Child Line* and other organisations within the field of psychological telephone help services, could benefit greatly from sharing their learning and experiences, in order to further develop their validation methodologies, both for the benefit of the organisations and the individuals. It may also be useful to explore in the future, how their validation procedures can be linked up with nationally-recognised qualification standards and certificates. So far, lack of occupational standards, especially for the occupations more often found in the third sector, is one of the main barriers for greater take-up of validation in general. In addition, lack of attention and especially trust in the third sector (i.e. non-governmental organisations) by public bodies is quite typical to many new Member States; therefore quite a lot of their energy and efforts are usually used to 'prove' themselves to the national authorities instead of developing their services, improving their delivery and encouraging more people to participate in voluntary work.

1.8 Conclusion

Child Line, together with the other Lithuanian Psychological Telephone Help Service Agencies represents a strong example of how assessment can be used within the voluntary sector, to the benefit of both individual volunteers, to the organisations they work for and, of course, to the ultimate beneficiaries of the services they provide. *Child Line* has begun to develop and improve its methodologies for validation of skills and competences in order to assess both the recruitment of volunteers and their further professional

Comment [obu1]: If your material contains an example of the terminology used, this would be interesting information.

development. The methodologies take into account both skills and competences through volunteer work for the organisation and through other life-wide experiences and are based on the portfolio method, observation and simulation and evidences extracted from work. However, the lack of official or at least widely recognised standards for use within the methodologies limits their impact and transferability.

Some effort has been made to share experiences and learn from other organisations working in a similar field. For example, the initial method of assessment for recruiting volunteers (a written assessment) was changed to an observation method, following sharing experiences with other organisations of a similar kind. Such sharing of experiences and learning from others is highly valuable in order to ensure the most appropriate methodologies are used and, in the long-term, to facilitate increased transparency and consistency within the sector. *Child Line* thus represents a bottom-up initiative, developed in response to an identified need. It demonstrates the challenges faced by third sector organisations but at the same time, demonstrates their strengths in working with, and for the individual beneficiaries of validation.