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ENGELBERG CENTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Volunteer Year in the Community Evaluation of Two Models of the Program: in the Arab and Druze Sectors

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The program of Volunteer Year in the Community is implemented by JDC-ELKA in Israel. It is aimed at young Arabs, Druze and both secular and Orthodox Jews, aged 18-22, who are exempt from military service. It was developed as an alternative framework to military service to enable the young people to both contribute to their home communities and be eligible for the benefits offered to discharged soldiers. An additional goal was to ease the transition of the young people to adulthood. In societies where young people are expected to integrate into adult life right after high school and pursue a career or further study, the program provides for an interlude that may be used for study, practical experience and volunteer work. During this interlude, they undergo preparation for the employment market or further studies, in addition to contributing to the community.

The year-long program is implemented in a group framework (of 15-20 participants each). It consists of some 40 hours a week of volunteer work in one's home community. Each group is distinct due to the different volunteer settings, the home communities and the emphasis accorded local content. The program offers a curriculum aimed at self-empowerment, personal and civic development, and the acquisition of knowledge and tools to ease the transition to higher education or employment.

For the evaluation, JDC-ELKA examined two models in the Arab sector; one, in a Druze village, the other in an Arab city. The evaluation was conducted as a basis for further development in anticipation of the program's expansion to additional groups, especially in the Arab/Druze sector. This report presents the main findings of the evaluation of the two models, their common issues, and observations regarding their implementation. The information on each program was presented separately in a report to staff in the individual communities.

Study Goals, Design and Sources of Information

The evaluation study had three goals:

- 1. To learn the principles of the models and how the two models were implemented, with an aim to improvement
- 2. To characterize the young participants in both models of the program
- 3. To examine the contribution of the models to the participants, the organizations and the communities implementing them

The data were collected at two points in time:

1. At the start of the program (in the Druze community in May 2006 and in the Arab city, in October 2007) – data were collected from community program coordinators on implementation and from the participants, on their preliminary impressions of the program,

- their reasons for joining, their expectations and motivation. Participants were also asked to complete a questionnaire on their personal and family characteristics.
- 2. Near the program's end data were collected from the participants and the coordinators on the volunteers' activities, satisfaction and perception of the program's contribution, and on the correspondence between their expectations and the program activities. We also interviewed staff from several community services, and members of the community steering committees regarding the community's connection to the program and directions for improvement.

At both points in time, JDC-ELKA directors were interviewed about their satisfaction with the program's implementation and about difficulties, challenges and dilemmas.

Findings

1. Description of the Two Models

While both programs combine a course of study and community work, they differ in the format of activities and program implementation.

- ◆ The Druze village model corresponds more to the basic model of Community Volunteer Year as a lever for community involvement (hereafter: the "volunteer model"). In the planning stages of the program, the target population was to include young men and women. During its implementation, however, a decision was taken to focus on young women since young Druze men do military service or work to help support their families. In this model, young women volunteer for 40 hours a week as teaching assistants in 1st and 2nd grades or kindergarten.
- ◆ The Arab city model differs from the basic model of other programs of Volunteer Year in the Community. It presents itself as a young leadership program (hereafter: the "leadership model"), and consists of 24 weekly hours of community work, referred to as "practical experience." The participants take active part in an organization, learn its working patterns and contribute to the organization and community through a personal project constructed in conjunction with the organization as part of their development of leadership skills. Participants initiated such projects as mentoring, computer courses for school parents or literacy programs for populations with disabilities. The participants commit to practical experience in two organizations and to initiating two projects over the year.

The program functions in cooperation with various community services via a steering committee that provides organizational and community support. For both models, the steering committees were reportedly active throughout the program, serving as both consultants and support staff. In the volunteer model in the Druze village, beyond the support of the steering committee, there was also broad organizational and administrative support from two other sources: the Israel Association of Community Centers (which allocated office space and a classroom at the community center) and the local Department of Education, which helped promote the program and provided conceptual and ideological support. At later stages of the work, however, there was less inter-organizational cooperation and contact due to apprehensions that the program was a

form of National Service – which aroused local opposition, and to technical/financial constraints of the settings, which made it difficult for them to meet needs to which they had committed.

Local program planners and JDC-ELKA directors had considered that the implementation of the Community Volunteer Year in the Arab/Druze sector might arouse opposition because of its perceived resemblance to National Service. Some leaders of Israel's Arab population object to including Israel's Arab citizens in national-civic service. This factor was taken into account during the formulation, implementation and assimilation of the model. A decision was taken to launch the program only after its goals had been presented to community leaders (including the head of the Education Department), its distinction from National Service had been clarified and a steering committee representing the relevant community services was involved. Nevertheless, the topic raised difficulties throughout the implementation process, particularly in the model of the Druze village. The fact that the program was supported by an association that lends its patronage to National Service volunteers posed a dilemma for the partners and weakened their connection to it; at the end of a year's activity, they terminated the program in this community. The leadership model encountered less problems of assimilation since it was essentially a leadership rather than a volunteer program. Yet, there too, despite the caution exercised and different marketing approach, some service personnel entertained doubts about its nature and connection with National Service.

2. The Involvement/Role of JDC-ELKA

In all models of the program in the Arab sector, JDC-ELKA provided the implementing organizations with training and professional support: a Coordinators Course – aimed at implementing the program in the communities, and a Program Directors Forum where common issues and dilemmas could be raised. JDC-ELKA and other associations also developed a curriculum for participants, comprising such topics as Active Citizenship – a civic-empowerment program for volunteer groups, and "Building a Picture of the Future" – a forward-looking, school-to-work transition program aimed at broadening understanding of the job market, employment and studies.

3. Personal Characteristics of Participants in Each Model

Some 20 young women participated in each model (there was one male exception) although the program was aimed at and marketed to both males and females (this issue was raised as a marketing problem). According to the self-completion questionnaire, all the participants in both models had finished 12th grade and most had earned a matriculation diploma. Regarding future plans, all but one young woman in the volunteer model planned to pursue higher studies. This finding was consistent with the young, strong target population of the program. All the participants also had some background of volunteering. In the leadership model, almost all had been civically active, some with prior experience of leadership programs.

The family characteristics of the participants also attested to the strength of the population: in most families, the fathers were employed and had completed high school or higher education. As a measure of economic status and modernization, the participants were asked if they had a car and computer at home. In both models, all reported having a family car; in the Arab city, all had also a computer at home (in the Druze village, 16 out of 17 completing the questionnaire), a finding consistent with existing data on the total population of Arab students in grades 6 to 9 (Harel, Y. et al., 2009).

The examination of free-time recreation patterns revealed that, beyond participating in the program, most of the young women in both models spent most of their time at home in various activities. In neither model was there any evident sense of loneliness or deficiency as regards social life.

4. Patterns of Program Activity

a. Volunteer Practical Experience

♦ Preparing, training and supporting the participants for their volunteer positions: In both models, there was an introductory process prior to assuming the volunteer positions. It included agreeing on expectations and preparing for work relating to the organization and the position. In the volunteer model, there was specific training as a teacher's assistant in the classroom and kindergarten, including lectures on various topics of early-childhood education and psychology. In the leadership model, the participants were offered study units in organization work and ethics, and explanations on the process of constructing a project.

In both models there was also on-going support. In the volunteer model, participants received ongoing weekly instruction to discuss problems, dilemmas and ways to cope with them in their classroom/kindergarten work. In the leadership model, there was group instruction every two weeks. The meetings were devoted to constructing a personal project and to work processes in the organization etc.

◆ Difficulties related to the organizations/services absorbing volunteers: Some of the difficulties encountered by participants stemmed from inadequate preparation on the part of the organizations for the absorption of the volunteers and the assimilation of the program. In the volunteer model, the participants reported that, at some schools, teachers, staff and parents had not made them feel welcome. Parents sought to understand the nature of the volunteer's position and were disparaging of volunteer work. Moreover, since the position of classroom volunteer had not been clearly defined, it differed from case to case, sometimes generating confusion and discomfiture about the job requirements for both the teachers and the participants.

In the leadership model, some of the frameworks apparently chose to utilize the participants as auxiliary staff for shorthanded existing activity rather than embark on the personal projects that the volunteers wished to construct.

◆ *Difficulties related to the participants:* In both models, frequent absences posed a problem that the coordinators found difficult to handle. Moreover, in the first year of activity in both models, quite a few volunteers dropped out (eight in both, i.e. 40% of the two models). In most instances, they left to take up salaried work.

Other difficulties included the volunteers' dissatisfaction with the positions they filled in the organizations. This was primarily true of the volunteer model where activity was concentrated on classroom/kindergarten assistance.

b. The Curriculum

The curriculum in both models consisted of nine weekly hours of civic and leadership topics to encourage forward-looking activities and thinking about future pursuits, as well as group dynamics to enhance personal awareness and identity.

In each model, the curriculum followed a different format. In the volunteer model, there was one day of studies a week. However, the curricula were only partially completed since the coordinator's workload interfered with the planned teaching. Nor was the coordinator adequately trained to transmit the curriculum and outside instructors had to be brought in. It took longer than expected to find these instructors and not all the topics on the curriculum could be covered.

In the leadership model, there were two study days a week of 4.5 hours each. The study day followed a structured schedule (the product of two years of program construction) and included activities devoted to the various program components of "Building a Picture of the Future," Active Citizenship, volunteer topics and ongoing professional training. In the first year of activity, apart from imparting the curriculum, the coordinators documented the training framework and course of training, and worked on expanding the preliminary materials, particularly on Arab culture, which had been provided by JDC-ELKA. The process of documentation and expansion facilitated familiarity with curriculum topics and made it possible to learn from experience, especially in situations of coordinator changeover.

c. The Coordinator's Role

The coordinator's work was threefold:

- With the group of participants teaching the curriculum, support and supervision of their volunteering/practical experience in the organizations;
- ◆ With the organizations in the community support and supervision of the process of absorbing participants into the organizations and of the activity of participants in the organizational framework;
- With the community services partner to the steering committee of the local program.

The volunteer model recruited one coordinator whereas the leadership model had three coordinators that worked with the program director. The difference in the number of coordinators in the two models was partially responsible for the problems arising in each. In the volunteer

model, the coordinator had a heavy workload and found it difficult to juggle all the duties. In the leadership model, the three coordinators managed a smaller workload and were under less pressure, but they competed over relations with the group. None of the three wished to take steps to harm that relationship and therefore found it hard to exert authority or apply sanctions for tardiness, absence and other situations warranting disciplinary measures. Another difficulty in the leadership model was staff turnover: coordinators changed twice in the two years of the program. Both the coordinators and program director reported that it took a long time to find and train a coordinator for the position, which added to the pressure on the other coordinators.

5. Program Contributions

The program contributions were examined with respect to the participants and the partner services or organizations, based on the data collected.

a. Benefit to the Participants

One contribution reported by the program coordinators from both models was the imparting of soft skills for the working world: the framework of daily employment created a structured schedule and encouraged such skills as time management around a wide variety of daily tasks. The participants themselves cited greater awareness about career and study choices for the future. They said that the practical experience in the organizations had taught them about their work abilities and personal likes and dislikes, which was fine preparation for choosing a university course of study. Furthermore, in both models, the participants reportedly improved their ability to express emotion, earning to reveal feelings and look inwards. This was reported by both the participants and the coordinators.

Participants reported great satisfaction with the relationships they had formed in the group and the fact that the group had served as a professional support network to air problems and dilemmas connected with the practical experience. Beyond professional support, the volunteer group in particular reported benefits of personal support and the group's contribution to their free-time recreation.

Special contributions were reported in each model: in the volunteer model, the participants reported gaining experience in working with children as an asset for future motherhood. In the leadership model, by virtue of the program goals to develop Arab community leadership, the participants cited heightened Arab identity and civic awareness, as well as exposure to social problems.

b. Contribution to Partner Services, Organizations and the Community

The reports of organization officials, program coordinators and executive staff revealed contributions on three levels:

1. *On the organizational level:* In both models, the very assistance of the participants in ongoing organizational activity was reportedly beneficial. In the leadership model, the new projects

initiated by the participants promoted fresh thinking, leading to organizational reflection on avenues of development in areas related to the projects.

- 2. To the target population of the organizations/services: There was more organizational staff (teacher aides in kindergartens and classrooms in the volunteer model) and more intra-organizational services (e.g., enrichment courses as part of the volunteer projects, in the leadership model).
- 3. *To the community:* In both models, the participants reported a change in the attitude of their surroundings (family and friends) towards volunteer work. The initial misunderstanding, disparagement or discouragement of volunteering (and urging to find paid work instead) evolved into understanding and a recognition of the importance of volunteering. Friends and family even expressed a desire of their own to volunteer.

Programmatic Directions

The study findings illuminated a number of programmatic directions and served as a basis for program improvement:

- Preparation and structured planning of organizational, conceptual and logistic provisions to support the program
- More comprehensive preparation of the organizations for absorbing the volunteers
- More structured organization of the coordinator's role
- Finding ways to attract more young men to the program
- Finding ways to deal with volunteer absences and dropout
- ◆ Creating a structured strategy to deal with the misconception of the program as National Service

The findings were presented to the steering committee of the local authorities and the ELKA-JDC program directors, and stimulated discussion of program improvement.

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