

International workcamps, an opportunity to local development

Cascais, a city inhabited by 270.000 near to Lisbon, is the European Youth Capital 2018. The international workcamps that are having place in the city since 2011 are one measure that the municipality uses to support and encourage local and international youngsters to be active citizens and make the difference in the local communities. The youth association Associação Juvenil Rota Jovem organizes those workcamps and we talk with Elena, the project coordinator, to know more about them.

Elena, an international two-week work camp with 20 participants is a big investment for the city of Cascais. Does it really pays off for Cascais?

Of course it does. It is a way to improve the social development of the poorest neighborhoods of the city, where the population in general and the youngsters in particular are facing high rates of unemployment and school leaving. This international programs are an excellent tool to bring new perspectives and inputs through the international volunteers (who are spending their free time to make a difference in the local communities here) and to motivate the local youngsters to be involved and do something for their city, to participate in. They also raise their awareness about international mobility programs and get motivation to be involved in volunteering projects. For the community is also essential to feel that someone cares about them and that there are people, locally and even internationally, willing to help them with their time and motivation.

How is the project funding?

Accommodation, food, local transportation, insurance and a small cultural program is provided by the program and the international volunteers only have to pay for their flight tickets and the visa-related costs, so the Municipality of Cascais actually invests in young people

who do not live here because of the great benefit that means for the city hosting people from all over the world. Moreover, we recently had a young boy from the social neighborhood where we implemented one of the workcamps last year who after being in contact with the international volunteers and our organization decided to take part in a EVS project [publishers note: EVS is European Voluntary Service). This is a great achievement and a perfect proof of the impact that this kind of projects can have in the youngsters. At the end, it is the international component what motivates our young people to participate in volunteering projects and encourages them to improve their skills and competences.

And what are you doing in the work camps?

Our workcamps are always focused on social development and the work that the international volunteers are doing in cooperation with the local community is related with the improvement of common areas. We cooperate with social workers from the area, who are working with the local community in a daily basis and they know their needs. We design the program taking those needs into account and they involve the community in the project, also the youngsters. Last year we fixed and renovated wooden benches and tables, we installed a pergola and a barbecue and we changed completely a unused green area by installing fitness equipment for the community. This year the line will be more or less the same and we will be renovating and installing street furniture and creating a community clothes line.

So Cascais saves costs for urban workers.

Not exactly, because each workcamp lasts only two weeks and the maintenance after the project is done by the local urban workers during the rest of the year. Moreover, we still need the landscape architects, engineers and urban workers support before and during the workcamp to support us and to have the work done as professionally as possible. Our project always

includes a lot of preparatory work done by specialists, who of course have permanent contracts and have to be paid. Somehow, it is even extra work for them.

How is the impact of the project on young people?

Instead of hanging around, they start to do something productive for their city. They pick up some English and make international friendships in an incredibly positive and safe environment. In the end, participants finally feel proud of themselves for the contribution they made to improve their local community and that improves also their self-esteem.

How many work camps do you organize per year?

Since 2011 we are having two workcamps every year.

Have you ever participated in a work camp?

No, I came to Cascais to do my EVS five years ago and I was involved in the workcamps from inside, supporting the organization. After the EVS I came back to my city in Spain but one year ago Rota Jovem proposed me to come back to help them to coordinate the workcamps. That's how I'm here again.

And what would you recommend me in order to convince my municipality to invest in international work camps?

They should read this interview and come to us if they need further information about it. It is a huge opportunity to be taken into serious consideration by the mayor, the city councils and the head of the local youth office.

Are you interested in joining an international work camp in Cascais or invest as a community in work camps?

Contact Elena through workcamps@rotajovem.com

In Germany, among others, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth subsidizes international work camps. More information at <https://www.ijgd.de/>