

## **Promoting Civic Engagement, Inclusiveness and Quality Education through Central and Southeastern European Network for Service-Learning**

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### **Abstract**

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the specificities of actor networking within the Central and Southeastern European Network for Service-Learning. It presents the context that led to the network's emergence in the region. The paper then delves into the network's main activities, highlighting how its collaborative initiatives have facilitated cross-border knowledge exchange, training programs, the establishment of a Regional Service-Learning Award, and advocacy for policy changes to institutionalise service-learning across Central and Eastern Europe. A dedicated section of the study is focused on evaluating the network's impact on its member organisations and the region's broader advancement of service-learning pedagogy. This includes an examination of the benefits that organisations have experienced by being part of the network, as well as the network's contribution to the growth and sustainability of service-learning initiatives. Finally, the study reflects on the CSEE Network for Service-Learning prospects, exploring strategies and opportunities for further strengthening regional collaboration and highlighting the long-term benefits of networking for promoting service-learning in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Keywords:** service-learning, networking, Central and Eastern Europe.

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## **Promovent el compromís cívic, la inclusió i l'educació de qualitat a través de la Xarxa d'Aprenentatge Servei d'Europa Central i del Sud-est**

### **Resum**

Aquest estudi proporciona una anàlisi en profunditat de les especificitats de la creació de xarxes d'actors dins de la Xarxa d'Aprenentatge Servei d'Europa Central i del Sud-est. Presenta el context que va provocar l'aparició de la xarxa a la regió. El document aprofundeix en les activitats principals de la xarxa, destacant com les seves iniciatives de col·laboració han facilitat l'intercanvi transfronterer de coneixement, els programes de formació, l'establiment d'un Premi Regional d'Aprenentatge Servei i la defensa dels canvis de polítiques per institucionalitzar l'aprenentatge servei a tot el centre i l'est d'Europa. També s'inclou una secció dedicada a avaluar l'impacte de la xarxa en les organitzacions membres i l'avenç més ampli de la pedagogia de l'aprenentatge servei a la regió. Es fa un examen dels beneficis que han experimentat les organitzacions en formar part de la xarxa, així com la contribució de la xarxa al creixement i la sostenibilitat de les iniciatives d'aprenentatge servei. Finalment, es reflexiona sobre les perspectives de la Xarxa, explorant estratègies i oportunitats per reforçar encara més la col·laboració regional i destacant els beneficis a llarg termini del treball en xarxa per promoure l'aprenentatge servei a l'Europa central i oriental.

**Paraules clau:** aprenentatge servei, xarxa, Europa central i de l'est.

## **Promoting civic engagement, inclusiveness and quality education through Central and Southeastern European Network for Service-Learning**

### **Resumen**

Este estudio ofrece un análisis profundo de las particularidades de la creación de redes de actores en el marco de la Red de Europa Central y Sudoriental para el Aprendizaje-Servicio. Presenta el contexto que llevó al surgimiento de la red en la región. El documento profundiza en las principales actividades de la red, destacando cómo sus iniciativas de colaboración han facilitado el intercambio de conocimientos transfronterizos, los programas de formación, el establecimiento de un Premio Regional de Aprendizaje-Servicio y la promoción de cambios de políticas para institucionalizar el aprendizaje-servicio en toda Europa Central y Oriental. También se evalúa el impacto de la red en sus organizaciones miembro y el avance más amplio de la pedagogía del aprendizaje-servicio en la región. Esto incluye un examen de los beneficios que las organizaciones han experimentado al ser parte de la red, así como la contribución de la red al crecimiento y la sostenibilidad de las iniciativas de aprendizaje-servicio. Por último, el estudio reflexiona sobre las perspectivas de la red, explorando estrategias y oportunidades para fortalecer aún más la colaboración regional y destacando los beneficios a largo plazo de la creación de redes para promover el aprendizaje-servicio en Europa Central y Oriental.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje-servicio, red, Europa Central y Oriental.

## 1. Introduction

The Central and Southeastern European Service-Learning Network<sup>1</sup> is a collaborative informal platform dedicated to advancing service-learning initiatives across the CSEE region. Its mission is to enable a supportive environment for Network stakeholders to use service-learning for community development and relevant learning in Central and Southeastern Europe.

To better understand the establishment, activities and impact of the CSEE Network for Service-Learning, it is essential to understand the specifics of the CEE region<sup>2</sup>. The countries of Central and Southeastern Europe are highly diverse. While they share everyday historical experiences, such as communism, socialism, and the transition to democracy, each country has unique roots in the transformation process. Since the 1990s, all CEE countries have undergone political, economic, cultural, and social changes related to broader societal shifts like globalisation, migration, and modernisation. Though witnessed later than in Western European countries, these changes have manifested in CEE nations' educational systems and forms of civic engagement. This context has also influenced the region's development of service-learning as a community-oriented pedagogical approach.

Service-learning in the CEE region responds, on the one hand, to the challenges of education and, on the other hand, to the challenges of promoting civic and community engagement. During the communist era, education in CEE countries was influenced by the state's blatant interference in the autonomy of schools, but also by the concept of collective education and the strong authoritarian position of the teacher. Thus, in the transformation of society, the education system has also been transformed, but it still faces many challenges (Hörner et al., 2015; Brozmanová Gregorová et al., 2019), such as lack of inclusiveness, scepticism concerning the introduction of innovative education methods, the transfer of knowledge and little emphasis on the formation of skills and the preparation of young people for real life, and a weak link between education and the needs of practice. It is also not easy for many schools to take the role of the community actor. Many are still not open to cooperation with public and non-governmental organisations and do not have sufficient capacities to solve community problems. Service-learning with its proven benefits in transforming education (Celio et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2015; Warren, 2012), for example, changing the role of the school in the community but also the role of the teacher by engaging pupils in the learning process, promoting inclusion and connecting what students learn with the natural world can respond very well to the above challenges and hence many organisations in CEE have started to develop service-learning as an educational strategy that can transform the education system.

On the other hand, service-learning in this region is also a response to the underlining of education towards democracy, active citizenship and taking

responsibility for the society in which citizens live. The tradition of civic activism was during the communism forcibly interrupted in individual totalitarian regimes, and the activities of all forms of independent organisations were purposefully and systematically reduced or subject to strict control. (Brozmanová Gregorová & Heinzová, 2023). In the aftermath of the 1990s, national education policies in CEE have largely overlooked the importance of fostering students' civic engagement as part of their educational experience. Instead, educating about democracy, human rights, political participation, civic engagement, volunteering, social responsibility, and activism has been predominantly left to the efforts of non-profit organisations. (Culum et al., 2021). As a result, it is not surprising that numerous EU reports and national studies have found political literacy and civic participation in many CEE countries to be significantly lower than in other European nations with a more extensive democratic history (see, for example, European Union Open Data Portal, 2017, 2020). Thus, the service-learning strategy has responded appropriately to the needs in this area, and a parallel argument for its development has been its benefits in terms of increasing personal and social responsibility or education for volunteering and active community life. At the same time, the strategy has made it possible to open schools to this very subject of education, which in many countries was seen as the preserve of non-governmental organisations rather than formal education.

Against this background, the CSEE Network for Service-Learning has been an important initiative to address the urgent need to bridge the gap between educational institutions and local communities, increase the quality of education and inclusiveness and foster civic engagement across Central and Eastern Europe.

## **2. Development of CSEE Network for Service-Learning, main objectives and activities**

The establishment of the CSEESL network was closely connected with the CLAYSS support program in Central and Eastern Europe, implemented in the period from 2016 to 2022, which included: 1) Training and development of learning resources; 2) Technical assistance and institutional support plans; 3) Publications adapted to the region and new ones, translated into local languages by local organisations in some cases; 4) Network working meetings; 5) International Service-Learning Conference and the International Service-Learning Week; 6) Regional Service-Learning Conference & Service-Learning Week; 7) Award for Service-Learning Experiences; 8) Systematisation and Communication of Service-Learning Experiences; 9) Training of trainers and promoters. (Avruj & Batista, 2022)

CLAYSS initiated the CEE program by integrating the participation of Network partners across its five initial components. Collaborating around shared objectives propelled the Network forward, enhancing the relevance of service-learning in the region and the effectiveness of the implemented actions. At the end of 2022, the

most active members of the Network convened to evaluate their achievements and develop the CSEE Network's statute, including its vision and strategic objectives. The members then formally adopted the network's statute at the start of 2023. The Statute of the Network aims to provide a sound basis for its sustainability and future growth - by consolidating lessons learnt, reflecting a sensible balance between ambition and practicality for the Network, and ensuring greater efficiency, clarity and equity between partners in their joint efforts.

The network's current members are Mary Ward Loreto Foundation (Albania), Međunarodno udruženje Interaktivne otvorene škole MIOS (Bosnia and Herzegovina), TOKA Organizata Kosovare për Talent dhe Arsim (Kosovo), Forum MNE (Montenegro), Fundatia Noi Orizonturi (Romania), Selegro (Romania), and Platform of Volunteer Centers and Organizations (Slovakia).

The CSEE Network established an independent cooperative structure that allowed individuals and organisations to collaborate safely and non-hierarchically. Its focus on committed, trust-based relationships was vital to overcoming conflict situations. (Avruj & Batista, 2022).

Main network activities with the generous support of CLAYSS from 2016 to 2022 and also supported from other, primarily European sources included:

- Organising Service-Learning Weeks and Conferences. The Service-Learning Weeks (2017 and 2022 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019 in Romania, 2020 in Slovakia, and 2021 in Kosovo) were an opportunity for teachers, youth workers, NGO and public institution representatives, and researchers to gather and share knowledge, insights, and successful service-learning practices from the schools, and youth organisations in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Also, during these events, the winners of the Regional Service-Learning Award were promoted and celebrated. The central events of the Service-Learning Weeks were international conferences accompanied by other gatherings like webinars of students, training for trainers or teachers, round tables, service-learning fairs, and meetings of representatives from the CSEE Network for Service-Learning.
- Development of resources in service-learning. During this period, the Network developed rich resources for further disseminating and promoting service-learning pedagogy in the region. Members developed handbooks, research, service-learning practice cases, manuals, and other documentation that supports the development and further dissemination.
- Training in service-learning. Capacity building for disseminating service-learning pedagogy in the region and at home countries was crucial support. Some members were at the beginning of promotion and introducing the service-learning methodology within their home countries, some have had substantial experience over seven or more years. A balanced approach of

mutual sharing and support (training, consultancy) and networking between the members and beneficiaries took place on multiple occasions, and members, with the support of CLAYSS, delivered these events to further disseminate the know-how in schools, youth organisations, communities within the home countries. The aim was to create a pool of trainers who could deliver training for teachers and youth workers in the area. Later, Network members organised training for educators in formal and nonformal education in their home countries. Training was also organised for the evaluators of the Regional service-learning award with the support of CLAYSS.

- The Regional Service-Learning Award. The Regional Service-Learning Award recognises outstanding achievements in service-learning pedagogy within the CSEE region. It was established in 2020 as a collective effort to highlight and celebrate the impactful contributions of individuals, organisations, and projects in service-learning. The primary aim of the Regional Service-Learning Award is to recognise and honour exemplary service-learning initiatives that demonstrate innovation, effectiveness, and meaningful impact on individuals and communities within the Central and South Eastern European context<sup>3</sup>.
- Joint projects to support service-learning development. Network members have delivered several regional projects that support the network's mission. These projects have ensured more vital visibility of service-learning pedagogy in the region, strategic solid partnerships among the Network's partners, and institutionalisation of service-learning within the educational ecosystem of each involved country.
- Advocacy for service-learning development and promotion. The activities mentioned and their implementation are also closely connected with promoting service-learning pedagogy in the region and creating the environment that will enable the development of this community-engaged learning approach. For example, in Slovakia, service-learning was incorporated in official documents of the Ministry of Education focused on the education of children and youth for volunteering, and service-learning support is also part of the Youth Strategy.

The CSEE Network for Service-Learning has made significant strides in advancing the field. It has facilitated cross-border knowledge exchange, developed training programs, supported service-learning establishment in educational institutions and organisations, and advocated for policy changes to institutionalise service-learning across the region.

### **3. Impact of the CSEE Network for Service-learning**

The impact of the Network's activities can be observed at various levels. During the preparation of this paper, the selected Network members were asked to reflect on the impact of the presented activities and joint initiatives and the benefits of being part of the Network, both for their organisations and the advancement of service-learning pedagogy in the region. We are summarising their reflection.

**Brozmanová Gregorová, A.; Malkic, E.; Butika, M.; Zeka, H.; Bejenaru, S. (2024). Promoting Civic Engagement, Inclusiveness and Quality Education through Central and Southeastern European Network for Service-Learning. *RIDAS, Revista Iberoamericana de Aprendizaje-Servicio*, 18, 60-71. DOI10.1344/RIDAS2024.18.5**

### 3.1. Reflected impact on individual and organisational level

Being part of the network has proven to be a transformative experience for its members, fostering individual growth and collective impact. For MIOS Tuzla, the network has amplified its visibility as a professional and theme-focused organisation. This increased recognition has been precious in positioning them as a leader in service-learning, a methodology they describe as both meaningful and practical in ensuring deep learning for students. The network has given them a platform to showcase their expertise and demonstrate how their methodology directly contributes to educational outcomes, reinforcing their role as a key player in promoting innovative teaching practices.

However, the benefits of the network extend beyond individual recognition. MIOS Tuzla highlights how the network has been instrumental in establishing strong partnerships with other organisations with similar values and approaches. This collaboration fosters professional exchange and a unified approach to creating social change. By connecting with like-minded organisations in the region, MIOS Tuzla can influence change within their country and contribute to a more significant, collective effort for regional transformation. This underscores the dual benefit of the network: while members receive support and recognition, they are also empowered to be agents of broader societal impact.

The network serves as a conduit for learning and collaboration for TOKA and the Platform of Volunteer centers and organisations. Being part of this community has given them access to a wealth of shared knowledge, allowing them to benefit from other organisations' diverse experiences while sharing their insights. This exchange of knowledge is not only about enhancing internal practices but also about expanding visibility on a larger stage. The network has given TOKA a platform to promote its service-learning programs beyond their immediate context, fostering opportunities for collaboration with regional and international partners. The exposure gained through the network allows TOKA to establish itself as a critical contributor in the field while also benefiting from the collective wisdom of other members.

SeLeGRo's experience highlights how the network can directly contribute to organisational growth and capacity-building. In their early days, SeLeGRo received encouragement and know-how from the network, which played a critical role in shaping their foundation and guiding their implementation of service-learning. SeLeGRo contributed to and grew from the network as they became more involved, benefitting from shared best practices and resources. The collaborative efforts within the network, such as publishing digital papers and improving regional awards, have enhanced SeLeGRo's visibility and strengthened its impact. This shared learning process has allowed SeLeGRo to evolve as an organisation, improving the quality of its work and expanding its influence across the region.

The New Horizons Foundation Romania has worked with service-learning in extra-curricular contexts since 2002 through the national and international educational program IMPACT Youth Clubs. However, for the New Horizons Foundation Romania, the Network managed to create essential contexts of collaboration between partners at the regional level in which each partner has the chance to bring added value to development at national and regional levels and also the chance to grow more extensive and more robust in its mission. How? By developing joint projects where the communities we work with have realised the value of diversity, the benefits of collaboration and the advantages of bringing educational, human and financial resources together for a common purpose that ultimately leads to the region's overall development. While part of the network, the New Horizons Foundation has not only built on the standard know-how. Still, it has also gained insights, inspiration and resources to develop a stand-alone program called Service Learning in the Classroom specially designed for kindergarten to high school students. Also, at the national level, the New Horizons Foundation and the SeLeGRo are building contexts to grow the community of service-learning practitioners nationwide, primarily through the National Service-Learning Awards they have already organised annually.

Thanks to the Regional Service-Learning Award, the Platform of Voluntary Centers and Organisations has started organising a national award for schools implementing service-learning, Engaged Schools. It has also significantly strengthened its partnership with the Ministry of Education in service-learning development.

What stands out in all these experiences is the network's ability to act as a platform for collective learning, resource sharing, and mutual support. By connecting organisations with similar values and goals, the network fosters an environment where members can learn from each other, share their successes and challenges, and collectively enhance their impact. It is through this collaborative spirit that the network not only benefits its members but also drives broader social change. As a part of the Network, each organisation becomes more substantial and more effective through its participation in the network, underscoring the value of working together to achieve common goals. The diversity of perspectives within the network is precious, as it brings together different approaches to service-learning, enriching the collective knowledge and creating more effective strategies for fostering positive change among youth.

### 3.2. Impact on the development of service-learning in the region.

The network has been instrumental in advancing service-learning across the region by establishing a platform for collaboration and knowledge-sharing among member organisations. This has been realised through various means, including joint projects addressing regional needs and challenges. The organisation of the

Regional Service-Learning Award has been particularly impactful, not only by recognising service-learning initiatives in schools and organisations but also by advocating for the widespread adoption of this methodology across countries and the entire region.

Moreover, the network has facilitated valuable exchanges, such as conferences, study visits, and youth exchanges, enriching participants' understanding and inspiring new service-learning approaches. Capacity-building efforts targeting teachers, youth workers, and youth leaders have equipped them with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement the service-learning methodology effectively. The network also provides ongoing support for implementing service-learning projects within member countries, ensuring these initiatives are well-executed and impactful.

These joint projects and initiatives have driven organisations to innovate and refine their methodologies, leading to enhanced educational outcomes and a more significant impact on the communities they serve. The cross-border exchange of ideas and experiences has strengthened the development of service-learning programs and fostered a regional culture of civic engagement and social responsibility, laying a solid foundation for future growth and collaboration.

The network has played a vital role in helping establish national service-learning networks. For example, SeLeGRo, in partnership with the New Horizons Foundation, coordinates the National Service-Learning Award in Romania and is creating a national service-learning network. They also propose a Service-Learning Institutionalization Certificate to formalise school service-learning practices. Through these efforts, Network members are advancing service-learning at a national level, fostering collaboration and educational transformation across countries.

The regional network is a vital resource and structure that supports development of service-learning in the region. It provides activities, papers, and connections with other partners thus the cooperation to spread further and disseminate service-learning. This is visible through expanding the Network to new members like Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia or the Czech Republic. This shows that service-learning is recognised as a meaningful and impactful teaching methodology for children and the youth's development. Through joint projects and initiatives, the Network shows a strong presence and systematic work on building the capacities of members and final beneficiaries (schools' teachers, students, youth workers, youth).

The Network is recognised in Central and Southeastern Europe and beyond. CLAYSS and a network of schools and organisations for service-learning present and recognise long-term experience in cooperation, implementation of various

projects, trust, competencies of partners, and implementation of impactful activities like the Regional Service-Learning Award.

#### **4. Future of the network**

The network's future looks promising as it continues to expand its reach and influence. Only in 2024 did two new countries join the Regional Service-Learning Award. Networks future can be seen in three levels: (1) by growing and joining new countries and organisations or institutions that work or want to start to work with service-learning; (2) by deepening the impact at national and regional levels, through capacity building and community mobilisation; and (3) by influencing policy changes and integrating service-learning more deeply into educational systems. The network could shape educational practices and civic engagement in the region. It is mature enough to strategically work on important issues regarding the connection of service-learning methodology with education and civic engagement in the region and on national levels of member partner countries.

#### **5. Conclusions**

For several reasons, networking among organisations working to develop service-learning in the CEE region is essential. It facilitates the sharing of resources and fosters collaboration, enhancing the overall impact of service-learning initiatives across the region. By building strong partnerships between educational institutions, non-profits, and community organisations, networking helps align goals and creates a cohesive approach to advancing service-learning in CEE. Additionally, networking provides access to diverse perspectives, ensuring that service-learning projects are inclusive and responsive to the unique needs of different regional communities. It also increases students' opportunities to participate in service-learning experiences relevant to their interests and career aspirations, thus enriching their educational journeys.

Furthermore, networking enables the replication and scaling-up of successful service-learning models across CEE, allowing effective programs to be adapted and implemented in various contexts. It fosters knowledge exchange, promotes innovation, and supports continuous improvement in service-learning practices. Networking also plays a vital role in advocating for service-learning within the CEE region, helping to secure the necessary resources and policies to sustain these initiatives. It supports the long-term sustainability of service-learning by fostering community among participants and stakeholders. Ultimately, networking empowers organisations to scale successful service-learning programs, extending their reach and impact to benefit more communities throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

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