

Hello everyone!

Hi dear listeners, welcome to this episode of the Inclusion and Diversity podcast with me, Greg and

Rahel - from our podcast kitchen.

So how does this work? For each episode, Rahel here

That's me.

Yes, you, talked to different guests, usually staff of national agencies for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps and bring us some of the highlights and contributions of these people.

For example, in today's episode, we'll hear from three different people Katarina, from the Croatian NA, Lia from the Polish NA and Joël from the NA in Belgium Flanders.

And this being the ID kitchen podcast, we always ask our guests about their favourite food!

Exactly, here's our guests introducing themselves:

My name is Katarina Brajdic... department for ESC... also used to work in Erasmus... euro desk officer. From Croatia... fish and red wine.

I'm Joel...50 years old. More than 20 years an ICT officer at Jint. No working with programs... but I'm supporting them mostly technically and I do also the whole ICT infrastructure at JINT.

And also Joël picked out a typical dish representing where he's from:

It's a Flemish dish... witloef with hesperoedes and kaassaus.

My name is... Lia... I work in polish national agency... already for more than 3 years. Now currently I work in ESC. I'm a project officer. I mainly work with projects. Also with trainings for volunteers... mid term, etc.

And here's Lia's culinary contribution:

I like to cook very much... all my friends and family knows. I am very fan of cooking... I like Armenian kitchen. I'm Armenian. I love to cook everything.

Actually... soup... yogurt... it's with yogurt and specific herbs... so it's very good sup... comfort food. It's called sabass... like to cook ... not everyone to cook it. It's yogurt... you have to be careful tnot to spoil the dish.

So, what are we going to cook?

I think we'll have to go with what's in the fridge...

We don't have chicoree or any fish unfortunately! But quite some veggies and there is lentils...

Well, given the temperature here, maybe a soup would be nice?

Oh yes, lentil soup, let's go for it!

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Before we jump into today's topic, talking about why inclusion and diversity are important for people working at national agencies responsible for Erasmus + and European Solidarity Corps... what stood out for you when talking to Katarina, Lia and Joël?

For me, it was impressive just how different the areas in which the three work are and yet how passionate all three speak about the topic. Each has their very personal connection to inclusion and diversity, Joël shared with me about having roots in both the Flemish and French part of Belgium and how that already gives him a perspective of different cultures. And he shared a story that I think is really worthwhile sharing here:

~~At a very early age... it was all about football. We were ... when I was 8 or 9 years old. I was playing football. We only had 8-9 people. But I had some friends of Turkish and Moroccan origin that I played with in my free time. I wanted to introduce them into the team. They were different it was sometimes a problem with other Belgian players...and we had a very good trainer. That was taking out the differences of us.~~

Joël explained how he had a very good trainer who made the kids reflect about their differences and communalities. He would say to them: "You all love soccer" and then he would watch matches with players coming from many different backgrounds. The trainer would tell them:

~~You all love soccer. We are going to see football games with Turkish players with American and with Belgian players. Watched games. You maybe different but you have the same interest and focus on that. Afterwards we had a good team. There was interaction between different players after the match. It was not as before on the playground... separated. We could talk and play very good together.~~

What a great story! Sometimes "inclusion" may be about focusing on what we have in common rather than what make us "different"

Yes, I agree. And our other guests also brought in great experiences, Katarina shared with me how inclusion has always been a topic present in her life:

~~Even before I joined the NA, inclusion was part of my life.~~ That topic was always important to me. Perhaps I didn't use the term inclusion or I didn't think about it as if it was a special concept. The idea was very much there. My views on inclusion were very much shaped with some of my own experiences. For example, my experience as a young refugee... my experience with scouts... I also had a friend in a wheelchair... drawing from those experiences actually helped me... not think more about inclusion, do something about inclusion ... Then it was also good ground to come here to work in the NA.

And lastly, let me also share what Lia brought to the conversation in terms of her experience:

I can say I was all my life the adult life I was always related to this topic. And this was one of the reasons... I chose inclusion in my studies... bachelor from linguistics and intercultural communication... accent on cultural inclusion and diversity. First topic I encountered... then I started to work in NGO Bridge of Hope with and for children and young people with disabilities... protect their rights... and work to include young people with disabilities into the society...

And Lia also shared how the experience of moving from Armenia to Poland and working with women with disabilities made her understand better what discriminations and challenges different groups are facing when wanting to participate in society.

Well, I can see now why these are great guests to explore why inclusion matters.

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Now, let's get to the juicy part: Rahel, why is it important that staff members of NA put on the inclusion and diversity goggles, so to speak, in their work?

You want me to just answer that and we go home? I'm joking, I think there's so many aspects to it and I'll happily share with you some of the reflections I heard from Lia, Katarina and Joël.

Let's start with Lia, here's her take on why inclusion and diversity matter in the programs:

It is very important that inclusion is key part of the program... should always be.. Inclusion is about people who are ...vulnerable groups... who are generally... of different reasons left out from the society from different activities... the idea of Erasmus and ESC is to make the program....equal for everyone... never mind what social group they are.

And Lia explained from her own experiences with the programs what impact participating in a youth encounter or volunteering abroad can have especially for young people with fewer opportunities.

Many people young people...many volunteers...do to the program... made new friends... went to other countries for the first time in their life... many of them were from small villages ... small cities... which are far from the main cities... young people with disabilities who took part in the program... discovered ... they discovered a new world for them. They went out from their home...and they see that it is possible to find new friends... to contact other people from other cultures...see new world... and specially for pwD it is much more difficult for other vulnerable groups... because very often it demands an inner power to go out from your place...and see other worlds... reality that is outside. That participation demands inner courage... all people, all young people... that have this courage... they decide the door of their room and go out... they never regret and they very often want to come back... always keep contact with program and their organisation...with NA.

I think that first-hand experience is super crucial, right? Hearing from young people directly or from organisations who hosted or sent them on the experiences, I think that's key to understanding why it's so important to make the programs inclusive and diverse.

Exactly, and Katarina explained to me another important aspect showing how being inclusive really means exploring the full potential that the programs have.

What do you mean by that?

Let's take the example of a youth encounter, it can be really powerful to expand young people's horizon and promote key competences like empathy and critical thinking.. But for that to happen, these encounters really need to be diverse and give them experiences with different kinds of peers.

~~Both programs... have inclusion in the core of the program. Very proud to be working for those programs.~~ Both programs give people opportunity to get to know other different people, different needs, different abilities. Get to know each other, **we probably have more in common than those differences** ... can build on differences. You **can't just talk about inclusion in theory...** only makes sense in practise... If young people only talk about inclusion in the classroom... didn't have a chance to play with people with different abilities. Programs give these opportunities. Most important thing... crucial thing to get to know other different people.

And despite being all set up for diversity, Katarina understands that there's a lot still missing in terms of really making the programs inclusive:

When I said inclusion is at the core... I believe that... There's lots of room for improvement. Keep tackling these issues. What we see is that for some beneficiaries even when they are willing to be more inclusive... they have problems with reaching young people in need. There are some of those who don't know how to organize such projects... those who want to but don't know how to.

I think that's important to highlight. So, in order to get there, what can NA staff members do to increase their inclusion and diversity skillset?

Great question, and I think Katarina has an important reflection about that:

It's very difficult to actually put yourself in the shoes of the other person. Try to have contact also with participants with fewer opportunities. I remember when we had, for example, young people with fewer opportunities when we were hanging out with them. Made us more aware of their needs. Made some of our discussions easier... Sometimes when you're behind your desk... just thinking... then you remember what it entails for a young person to go abroad... It really helps to put things into perspective. Really have to try to be in the field as much as we can, not just behind our desk.

Katarina told me that it's very difficult to connect with young people and understand their needs and experiences better if you stay behind your desk. So her main advice for other NA staff is to go out into the field as much as possible.

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So, I was wondering, what about Joel.  
Why does he think that inclusion and diversity are crucial for the programs?

Being inclusive is not seeing more than the differences of the people, understanding each other better. Understanding that you have the same problems in another setting maybe, helping each other. I like it when you put 20 babies of different colors, different origins. You don't see any boundaries or xenophobia or something like that. It is taught to us when we are young, going to school,... . Scientific projects that a mixture of different cultures has a whole lot of impact on the scientific project. Differences in culture you look more openly to stuff.

But Joël also said that he doesn't really like the word inclusion:

It has a connotation with exclusion. You cannot get in if you weren't excluded before. I find it a pity. ... I don't want youngsters to have that stamp on them when they go on projects. If we talk about equality... is inclusion equal? I don't know. In the perception of other people.  
Socio-economical inclusion...

I guess one very interesting thing that Joel brings here is the power of words  
Words matter and we do need to be conscious of the impact of the words we use. This could be a great topic to discuss with your colleagues: what words you feel comfortable using when talking about inclusion and diversity.

Besides these more general thoughts, Joël and I talked quite a lot about barriers and he pointed out that he sees socio-economic barriers to be something to be looked at more when we talk

about diversity. He feels this topic is often overlooked even if it's so strongly intertwined with education and privilege and the opportunities that we have.

I was just thinking about how socio-economic barriers are often invisible - especially to those with a lot of privilege, who might've never had to worry about money, for example.

Yes, totally, it makes me think of a colleague of mine at university who never joined us when we went for drinks after class.. Until one day we realized it was because she could not afford it. Besides that, she lived in the neighbouring city because it was much cheaper there and she had to get back there by bike. So it took us several weeks to transfer our after class gatherings to someone's flats... and to offer her to stay over whenever she wanted. And I just wonder how many times we do not see this.

I fully agree, especially because I have been on the other side of your story... and, expanding on that, this might also be the case for other different barriers, don't you think? How we are aware of **some** but fail to see **other** barriers.

Yes! And Katarina brought another relevant reflection when it comes to barriers or reasons why people have fewer opportunities that I think we should hear:

Another thing I notice.. Inclusion is seen like a checkbox that's good to be ticked. We often see... what kind of young people have you included... and often we see they tick the box saying Geographical and economical obstacles... fine... but short-cut. When you do one step towards inclusion... in Croatia lots of rural areas, and Croatia is not a very rich... but everyone could fall in these categories. We have done something but can't see any real effort / outreach. Change this mindset... real effort for going the extra mile, not just token. What I said it's challenging.

For that reason, Katarina thinks that really understanding your local context is crucial and that the programs allow to adapt to that. She shared how the European Commission now allows national agencies to add a national priority to the general priorities given by the Erasmus + program...

Which are again?

**Inclusion and diversity** ... of course, **Digital Transformation, Participation in Democratic life and Environment and fight against climate change.**

So besides these, national agencies can add a national priority. And this can be a great tool for better understanding inclusion at the local level. Here's the experience from Croatia that Katarina shared:

We talked about it and decided to choose priority of rural youth with special emphasis of areas affected by the earthquake. Great damage in many parts of Croatia. National priority project

application to focus on those areas helping people there... including young people from there and so on.

Have one networking activity dedicated exactly to that priority. ~~Connect different stakeholders interested in that priority.~~ I'm very glad European Commission allows this possibility. Realities different... inclusion as horizontal priority. For our country... earthquake such big impact... could react quickly with the program.

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You know... barriers are not just individual, right? This became clear in my conversation with Joël, who shared about what barriers there might be for organisations that work with groups of youth with fewer opportunities...

Oh wow, I didn't think about it that way... So NA staff really need to look at personal barriers for the young people and for organisational barriers for the beneficiary organisations.

Exactly, here's what Joël said from his IT perspective:

~~I think sometimes... the numbers they want to get out.~~ Sometimes it's not easy for them to write a project in the first place. EC and NA are fixated too much on application forms. What do you want that all projects are written by university, college students... or opening for lower educated people that have a nice project but cannot put it down on paper. What's the meaning of the paper... all is fixated on that application form and not on the **way the effort they do** to get an international project running. ~~I see that a bit as a border that is hard to overcome.~~

Wow, I had never thought of that!

I know, right? And Joël shared how important it is to understand the work of beneficiaries who focus on youth with fewer opportunities. He talks about the field of young people with mental illness, an area where he has personal experience with, and how organisations that work in that field might just find the barrier of applying for funding too big:

You have to be much more concentrated if you want to work with people like that... then making such an application is an extra they don't have sometimes time for it. I see in the programs... they mostly go to the same organisation that can write and do fabulous international projects with a lot of people... but it's sometimes visibility is important but what's the feeling of the youngsters... what's the impact it has on their lives. If you have a PHD doctor going abroad with an intercultural project... the impact will be less than if you have someone who is learning auto mechanics and is doing an international project... because those people don't have those opportunities.

And I think that's such an important point when we think about the role of NA staff when it comes to promoting inclusion and diversity. The importance of the "supportive approach" to truly

help organisations who need extra support to be able to apply. B we'll talk more about this "supportive approach" in upcoming episodes, right?

Definitely!

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Let's take a moment... and please just try the soup, is it salty enough?

For me it can't be salty enough... but yes, it's delicious.

You know, since it was quite clear from the start that all three guests strongly believe in the importance of inclusion and diversity in the programs, I wanted to know from them if there's any recipe they follow in their work:

Of course, always looking for a good recipe, aren't you!

Haha, totally, this is the ID kitchen after all, now I need to disappoint you. Katarina told me, that there's no one size fits all recipe. She did tell a story that I find important to share though:

We were always thinking... if there is a person we can grant an accompanying persons. Once we even made little mistake we cut down number of accompanying person... 2-3 per pax. We thought one person should be enough. Hard lesson we learned: needs and recommendations... they explained why it's necessary to have more than one accompany person. Lesson we learned. Wish we knew from the beginning We also learn with time.

It's so good to hear about that ability to listen and learn and to really accept having made mistakes, right?

I think that's crucial indeed. Yet, Katarina told me that this is an ongoing conversation, how the NA can distribute the resources they have, when are financial requests linked to inclusion justified and when not. But she said that with the new program cycle, the financial support has become definitely easier to handle for NAs.

Katarina also believes that we should be careful not to frame inclusion as "extra" help, making young people with fewer opportunities feeling self-conscious, ...

People are feeling better giving than taking. When I was a young refugee...we received lots of help and support... I was ashamed to receive help. Afraid would look at me ... as someone not worthy of help. Today I'm ashamed that I was shamed. Great that program gives young people opportunity to contribute. Not just receiving end.... Also very empowering for young people.



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Greg, while we head to the table to enjoy this delicious meal, I wanted to share a story with you that I've been thinking about a lot since I heard it from Joël. He told me about this program he was part of when he first joined Jint. It was promoted by the ministry of youth that wanted to take every young person who would turn 18 exactly on the national holiday to go to the world expo in Lisbon.

Wait, can you explain that again?

As Joël said, it's a bit of a strange project. Basically, anyone who turned 18 on July 21 in that particular year was invited to travel to Lisbon.

Ok, now I got it. Curious where you're taking me here.

So, the only criteria to join the program, was the people's birthday. So it brought together very different Belgians... a diversity that many of the projects nowadays would wish for.

It was ideological diversity. When you're 18, you can be a Latin student... or hairdressing student. You don't have people who are already open-minded but are in different mindset and it worked.

And Joël shared just how amazing it was seeing this group that initially had quite some friction slowly growing together and creating a group spirit.

What I find so amazing here is that being inclusive probably wasn't the main goal of the program... yet it was much more inclusive than many others that try hard. Isn't that incredible?

Right? I wonder what we can learn from that....

Hold that thought...

Well, while we continue this amazing topic, I think we need to wrap up this episode. A great thank you goes out to our guests and I look forward to being back soon. Now that we have established that inclusion and diversity is important, I look forward to exploring who's in charge of making it happen... in our upcoming episode.

Ok Rahel, back to our conversation. What were you saying?

Yes, I was wondering, what if...

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