VA2EL "VALUING EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE OF LOCAL COUNCILLORS": DEVELOPING AN E-PORTFOLIO FOR LOCAL COUNCILLORS IN EUROPE

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The Department of Commerce, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University proposes to offer a "Certificate Program in microfinance" through distance education mode in collaboration with a Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) to improve functional abilities of Self Help Group (SHG) members and community resource persons. In order to launch the certificate program, a research on the educational needs of SHG members has been conducted.

The decentralization process has become a reality in Europe. Autonomy, competence and responsibility are raising the issue on the status of local councillors in many European countries. New competences are placed under the responsibility of local authorities and their representatives, the local councillors. The professional environment of such local leaders has become more and more complex although they often assume a "volunteer" status. Increased specialized competences in terms of technical, administrative and managerial capacity are necessary assets for local councillors, who often learn by doing, facing directly emerging critical situations. Despite the significant role and the political responsibility they hold for years, they still wonder whether and how can they benefit from the very particular experience achieved during their mandate. In particular, the local councillors need a specific support for the assessment of their formal or informal learning.

Va2el "Valuing Education and Experience of Local Councillors" is a two-year Leonardo da Vinci project co-funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Program. The project started in October 2008 and will finish in September 2010. It is addressed to local councillors serving or having served in local authorities in the six partner countries involved in the initiative: France, Austria, Greece, Italy, Poland and Lithuania. The project's specific target group are councillors in small municipalities. Being poorly remunerated, they usually combine their mandate with a full-time job. Thus their local-council experience is more likely to be treated as volunteer work and under-appreciated by prospective employers.

The Va2el project aims at proposing a specific support for the local councillors, the E-Portfolio, in the framework of recognition

and self-assessment of the achievements acquired through their experience, in order to adapt the competence to the changing needs of job market and also increase their chances of mobility. The Va2el project implements the E-Portfolio tool for local councillors to identify and value the acquired competences and skills experienced during their mandate. The use of such a tool leads to a self-exploration allowing the local councillors to find out what skills and competences they have gained, also focusing on their training needs and future professional objectives.

The multi-actor Va2el partnership includes: "The National Institute for Local Development" (INDL), "Institute for Research and Information on Volunteering" (Iriv), and "Regional Association of Information for Territorial Communities" (ARIC) from France, "Vienna institute for Urban Sustainability" (Oikodrom) from Austria, "Association for Adult Education" (AAE) from Greece, "Università degli Studi Guglielmo Marconi" (USGM) from Italy, "Institute for the Development of Social Sciences" (IRSS) from Poland and "The Kaunas Labour Market Training and Counselling Services" (KLMTCS) from Lithuania.

An important first step in the project was a comparative research about the situation surrounding local councillors in the six countries taking part in Va2el project. The findings of each national report review the situation of local councillors in the partner countries, affirming that a local council mandate facilitates the development of valuable skills and competences. Employers should recognize and value this experience, as well as facilitate the ex-councillors re-entering the labor market. This would help to strengthen the status and legitimacy of local councils, enhance the re-employment prospects of former councillors and bring benefits to their future employers.

Depending on the function in the council (and in the various council committees), local councillors develop knowledge in different areas of local-government competence such as: local and inter-local administration, local finances, strategic planning, local development, environmental protection, welfare assistance, best practice/policy innovation, international cooperation (associations, twining partnerships) etc. as well as knowledge of administrative procedures (including e-governance, quality assurance) and the policymaking process. They also develop a range of personal and social skills (e.g. problem solving, conflict resolution, negotiating

skills, strategic thinking, networking, leadership, teamwork).

The E-Portfolio for local councillors has been developed by the Italian partner Università degli Studi "Guglielmo Marconi" (USGM) in the framework of the Va2el project and it will be experimented in all partner countries.

The E-Portfolio is a ongoing process, both a tool and method, to identify and gather experiences, and help to reveal competences acquired by a local councillor. It represents an user-friendly and effective tool which helps users to think about and reflect on their own experiences. In the case of local councillors it gives support in identifying benefits from their local mandate. This tool can be useful in the local councillors current position and in case of future relocation in the labor market.

Figure 1. E-Portfolio Process
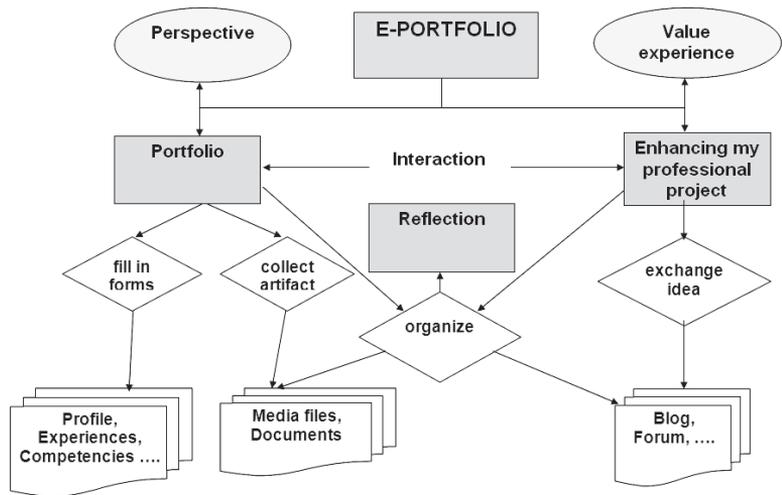
The added value of an E-Portfolio

The E-Portfolio provides more technological features compared to a traditional portfolio, allowing local councilors to benefit from an online tool with special functionalities such as social network utilities by using embedded tools (groups, blog, forum, etc.) to share experiences. It may include written documents, photos, videos, links and any element related to a specific competence or experience. The main aim of the E-Portfolio tool is:

• to offer local councillors a self-evaluation for their experience:

by doing a statement of the experience during their elective mandates, by expressing their experience in terms of acquired and developed competences, in reminding them the training followed during their mandate;

- to provide local councillors with a common basis of analysis to be shared with other local councillors whatever local authority they are working for, so that they will be able to use the E-Portfolio as career guidance;
- to propose a tool of reference for public authorities and professionals in the field of human resources; so it might provide local councillors with some form of "common" recognition.
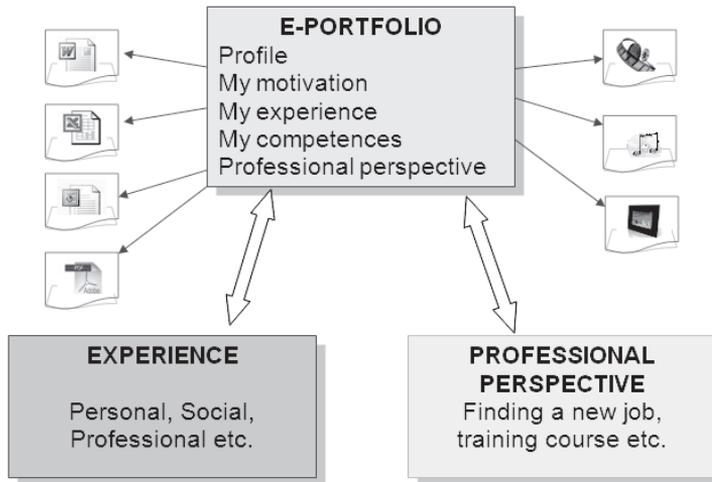

Figure 2. E-Portfolio tool

The E-Portfolio main sections to be filled in are the following ones: "Profile", "My motivation", "My experience", "My competences" and "Professional perspective".

The section "Profile" asks the user some personal information such as gender, age, studies, etc. and some questions to answer such as: When and how have you been first elected? Why are you interested in a local mandate? Has your local mandate been an asset for you: in a personal and /or professional perspective? etc.

The section "My motivation" asks the user their motivation for working as a councillor, by providing multiple choice answers or a

free text area to add more information.

The section "My experience" contains a details about user's personal experience, to be completed and explained.

The section "My Competences" presents five main groups of competences:

- Communication
- Administration, Budget and Accountancy
- Management and Organization
- Management and Implementation of projects
- Analysis of the public needs

User can select from one up to five competences acquired, that he/she would like to value in a professional perspective. In the section "Professional perspective", the user introduces the competences he/she would like to develop from a professional perspective. For each competence it is possible to add some information like: goal, action to take, time and result to be achieved. Through the completion of the "My experience", "My motivation" and "My competences" sections, the local councillors will accomplish a "reflection" on their professional profile.

In the light of that, the E-Portfolio could be considered as a strong tool of support for local councillors in identifying, communicating and making use of the special competences acquired and/or developed through their elective mandate, in order to:

- gain higher self-confidence at work and especially after the fulfillment of their mandate;
- be able to improve their return to the labor market;
- be able to share their experience with other local councillors.

The multilingual Va2el E-Portfolio is available on the project website at www.va2el.eu.

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