

## **ABSTRACT**

# **VOLUNTEERING AND PARTICIPATION ON THE AGENDA**

## **Survey in volunteering policies and partnerships in the EU**

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### **Background**

Volunteering plays an important role in finding solutions to societal issues. Many nations are beginning to recognise the contributions that volunteers make to social and economic development. Volunteering empowers individuals, builds solidarity, encourages participation, enhances social cohesion and protects vulnerable groups against economic, social and political marginalisation.

In many countries, the United Nations 2001 International Year of Volunteers (IYV) served as a catalyst for governmental efforts to stimulate volunteering and promote the voluntary sector. In addition, private and public sectors are increasingly cooperating to develop policies and implement legislation to facilitate volunteering.

Each government must decide for itself how to formulate its role in supporting volunteering by first determining appropriate roles for various situations. An effective voluntary sector requires cooperation between the government and other parties. To date, no clear picture exists of the content of volunteering policy and the impact of governmental support on volunteering in different European countries.

### **Eurofestation 2004**

In connection with the Dutch EU presidency, the Dutch national volunteer centre (CIVIQ) and the department of Business-Society Management of the Rotterdam School of Management<sup>1</sup> conducted a research study on volunteering and volunteering policy in all 25 EU member states. The research was conducted in preparation for Eurofestation 2004, a three-day conference on volunteering and corporate community involvement.

The goal of Eurofestation 2004 is to increase the awareness of volunteering on the EU political agenda, and it will focus on (stimulating) the social sustainability of Europe and developing methods for stimulating volunteer effort and corporate community involvement in EU member states.

### **Research Method**

The qualitative, exploratory study sought to define the current position of volunteering and the role of the private and public sector in each of the 25 EU member states

The questionnaires addressed the following issues:

- General data on volunteering;
- Volunteering policy;
- Initiatives and developments;
- Cooperation between the public and private sector.

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<sup>1</sup> In cooperation with the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) and with financial support of the Dutch Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS).

While responses from the 25 countries yielded a wide range of data that varied in quality and completeness, most countries were able to provide some information about the scope and extent of volunteering.

### **Structure of the publication**

The publication consists of two distinct parts. The first part analyses the results obtained from the survey. The second part of the publication provides an overview of volunteering in all EU member states on a national level.

The purpose of the research was to explore the current state of volunteering policies and partnerships – and thus also the state of volunteering in general – within the European Union. The goal was to develop a general picture to provide a somewhat coherent basis for analysis.

### **Main findings**

#### 1. Definition of volunteering

There is a broad consensus that volunteering is important for society at the individual, organisational and societal levels. Such consensus does not mean, however, that all countries share the same definition of volunteering. Definitions used in the EU member states tend to share at least three dimensions in common:

- It is non-obligatory;
- It is unpaid;
- It is for the benefit of others.

While most of the definitions and understandings of volunteering make mention of 'beneficiaries', none of them includes the volunteers themselves among the beneficiaries. This finding highlights the importance of broadening the general understanding of 'benefit' to include less-tangible returns.

#### 2. Number and characteristics of volunteers

- There was considerable variation in the data provided by the various countries concerning the numbers and characteristics of volunteers. The percentages of the population reported to be active in volunteering ranged from 27% in the Netherlands to 51% in Austria.
- In general, volunteering was found to be higher among the more educated segments of the population.
- In general, volunteering appears to be dispersed across a wide range of age categories, although there appear to be fewer young adult volunteers (under the age of 35) than there are volunteers of other ages. Here again, demographic, historical and methodological issues make this result difficult to interpret.

#### 3. Areas of volunteer activity

- In general, the fields of 'health and social care' and 'sports' constituted the most popular categories of volunteer activity.
- Activities involving sports were clearly the most popular volunteer activities in northern and western European countries.

#### 4. Recruitment and motivation of volunteers

- Family and friends clearly constituted the most important source of new volunteers, with 'work contacts' and 'press and publicity' also serving as major channels of recruitment.
- 'Social responsibility' and 'helping others' were among the most important motivations reported by responding countries, although the countries varied considerably in the rankings they assigned to other categories of motivation. Some countries for instance listed 'recreation' as the most important motive for volunteering.

## 5. Trends and initiatives

- The character of volunteer assignments appears to be changing; they are becoming shorter and more project-based.
- In general, it appears that the attitude of governments in the European Union towards volunteering is becoming more positive.
- Responding countries provided information about important and innovative volunteering initiatives that have been undertaken since the 2001 United Nations International Year of Volunteers. The long and varied list includes:
  - Establishment of national councils;
  - Introduction of national websites and databases;
  - Media campaigns;
  - Establishment of national volunteer centres;
  - Introduction of legislation on volunteering.
- Most countries also mentioned the introduction of training programs on the management of volunteers and national festivals to recognise and promote volunteering.

### **Points and recommendations for the agenda**

Responses to the survey suggest a number of points and recommendations for the policy agendas of the European Union, the governments of the member states, national volunteer centres, volunteer organisations and – in some cases – the corporate sector

#### *Obstacles that must be removed*

- Lack of data; National governments and other parties involved should improve their ability to monitor developments in volunteering, as well as their ability to evaluate the value added by volunteering and participation in their countries.
- Lack of coordinating bodies at the national level: Having a coordinating ministry or council offers the advantage of clarifying where to obtain information and who is responsible for monitoring developments; it also largely guarantees ongoing governmental attention for volunteering.
- Lack of infrastructure: Information received from countries that do have such infrastructure highlighted a number of advantages, including the ability to exchange information concerning 'good practices', to have a 'voice' towards other stakeholders, to raise funds more efficiently and to facilitate new developments.

#### *Importance of proper promotion and recognition*

- Definition of volunteering: There is a need for a practical definition that will facilitate volunteering across borders and allow the free movement of volunteers within the EU. A common understanding in Europe might also stimulate governments that have not already done so to incorporate volunteering into their official national enumeration activities.

- Image & promotion: The contribution of volunteering to society is often expressed in terms of social capital or its role in creating a socially cohesive society. It is necessary to change such perceptions to acknowledge the individual-level advantages and benefits of volunteering as well.

- Networking: Much work remains to further strengthen base of volunteering at all levels (local, national and European), particularly with regard to strengthening the 'voice' of the voluntary sector in Europe.

#### *Money and funding*

The fact that volunteering is unpaid does not mean that volunteering programmes incur no costs. These expenses must be paid by others, including governments, clients or funders. The responses also expressed a clear need for easier access to European-level

funding sources. With the exception of one programme for young volunteers, access to European funding for volunteering is currently problematic.

*Learning and exchange*

Countries and governments can learn from each other. Responses to the questionnaires revealed a broad consensus regarding the value of encouraging the exchange of information, experiences and good practices at the European level. Topics for this exchange are for instance: Participation of youth and the elderly; Shifts in motivations to volunteer: Partnerships with corporations: