



3rd March 2008

CEV Written Response to Stakeholders' Meeting with the European Commission
(25 February 2008)

CONSULTATION ON A NEW INITIATIVE ON VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

CEV welcomes the proposal of the European Commission, in response to the Council Resolution of 19 November 2007, to develop a new initiative on the voluntary activities of young people, and appreciates the inclusion of NGO sector stakeholders in DG Education and Culture's consultation process. Further to our participation in the meeting of 25 February, CEV would like to submit the following written statement to elaborate its contribution.

1. General principles to be considered in framing a new initiative

Adding a European dimension to voluntary activity at the local level - CEV urges the Commission to look beyond trans-European voluntary service and to focus any new initiative on giving added European value to volunteering carried out at local level. While EVS is a highly successful and well-regarded programme, only a tiny minority of privileged young people will ever have the opportunity to engage in this programme. In contrast, young people of all abilities and backgrounds are actively engaged in their communities throughout Europe. They are the hands that translate European values and policies into action, day after day. Volunteering does not need to be trans-European to have a European value.

Building on existing initiatives and processes – CEV believes that added value can only be achieved from a new initiative that explicitly seeks to develop synergies with those programmes, projects and organisations that are already leaders in the field of youth volunteering. Any new initiative should, therefore, seek to strengthen and build upon existing best practice by developing genuine partnerships with the stakeholders from the volunteering infrastructure in the Member States. In the below mentioned areas, many initiatives exist at national level (TV campaigns, volunteer cards, databases of placements, etc). The added value of European action should be not necessarily inventing new tools but building on and further developing existing ones.

Creating a 'bottom up' process – CEV supports, in principle, the possible initiatives outlined by DG Education and Culture at the Stakeholders Consultation. However, in order to succeed, all these actions will require considerable input from local, regional and national youth volunteering organisations, in addition to their European-level representative bodies. CEV, therefore, strongly recommends that the Commission makes every effort to create a genuinely 'bottom up' initiative by obtaining the views, support and co-operation of those organisations who engage directly with young volunteers at the earliest stage of the process. In particular, it will be important to take account of the experience of 'grassroots' practitioners in considering the practicalities of implementing schemes such as a Euro Label or a Youth Volunteer Card. This requires time and active consultation at all stages leading to the final initiative.

Focus on disadvantaged and excluded young people - Young people who are already excluded from education, training and work are also much less likely to be engaged in their communities or to have access to volunteering opportunities – at local or at trans-European level. Yet these are precisely the young people who could most benefit in terms of skills development, increased employability and personal development and empowerment that volunteering brings. CEV, therefore, urges the Commission to focus any new initiative on youth volunteering on widening access to voluntary activities, especially those available in their own communities, to disadvantaged young people who do not currently volunteer.

Work towards better peer exchange of Member States and within the Commission. Both the principles mentioned above and the concrete ideas outlined below could be better achieved if there were mechanisms in place for ongoing direct exchange between Member States in the field of volunteering – and for all ages and groups in society, rather than “artificially” singling out young volunteers. The same applies for the work within the Commission itself, as there are now a wide variety of initiatives in the field of volunteering in EAC, EMPL, and also ENV and ECHO. There should be an ongoing inter-service consultation and exchange to tap into synergies between different initiatives.

2. Comments and suggestions on possible initiatives

1. **A European Youth Volunteer Card** similar to the ISIC student card – This initiative has significant appeal in its potential to:
 - a) give recognition for the contribution of young volunteers to their communities by entitling the holder to special benefits (e.g. reduced tariffs for public transport or leisure facilities)
 - b) build links and partnerships between local volunteering and businesses which could offer special discounts or benefits to cardholders
 - c) highlight the Europe-wide nature of volunteering by entitling cardholders to benefits in all Member States, regardless of where their volunteering has taken place and by giving it a European-wide recognised logo / label

Such a scheme presents practical difficulties, not least how to frame criteria for which volunteers would be entitled to the card. By stipulating particular types of volunteer activities, a required number of hours of volunteering or a minimum duration of commitment, it risks creating divisions among volunteers in the same community, or even the same organisation, whereby some volunteer work is seen as more valuable than others. However, the very development of such a Europe-wide card is a meaningful trans-European activity and the prospect of giving young Europeans benefits for their card at local level or when travelling to other countries in Europe make the European value of their local engagement tangible. Different countries will develop different kinds of partnerships and benefits for the card – but all European countries will participate and, thus, strengthen the European spirit of active young volunteers.

2. **European database of youth volunteer opportunities** – CEV strongly supports the development of a single access point to volunteering opportunities across Europe. However, given the many difficulties associated with large-scale ITC projects, and the existence of such resources at national level in a number of Member States, CEV suggests that the development of a web portal giving access to existing online resources may prove more fruitful. This initiative could simultaneously strengthen the existing infrastructure by upgrading existing national or sectoral websites e.g. improving accessibility for speakers of other European languages.
3. **EU-wide media campaign** – CEV recommends that the Commission investigates the potential of an EU-wide media campaign to highlight the European nature of volunteering at the local level. By ‘branding’ volunteering under the theme such as ‘Volunteering makes you strong – Volunteering makes Europe strong [Volunteering makes YOUrope strong]’, a campaign could create awareness that the diverse activities of young volunteers at local level are practical expressions of European values of solidarity, participation and democracy, and promote a sense of a European community of volunteers acting within varied local conditions and traditions. Such a campaign might be productively linked to the various national and regional volunteer days and weeks which take place throughout the year in many Member States, and support the introduction of such campaigns in those countries which do not yet celebrate and recognise young volunteers in this way.
4. **Citizens Panel on youth volunteering** - A Citizens Panel on Youth Volunteering, bringing together young volunteers active at local level, provides an example of an initiative which upholds the key principles highlighted earlier in this document. This would be a genuine ‘grassroots’ activity that builds on a successful existing model of citizen engagement and brings Europe to local volunteers, rather than expecting them to ‘come to us’. The process could address issues identified by both the Commission and NGOs at the consultation meeting, such as how to engage disadvantaged and excluded young people in community volunteering and whether local volunteering is an effective way of promoting active European citizenship among young people.