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Green Paper on Demographic Change  
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European Commission  
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**Object : European Commission Green Paper on Demographic Change COM(2005) 94 final**

Dear Commission officials,

The European Volunteer Centre (CEV) is writing in relation to the consultation for the **Green Paper on Demographic Change**. Firstly, we would like to thank the European Commission for this important initiative. Given the major changes in our society, reform cannot longer wait in this area. While we do agree that our economies have to be adjusted we would like to express, however, our concern that citizens (young persons and older persons) seem to be largely seen in the Green Paper's text as instruments for economy. In the points we raise we would like to challenge this approach and propose actions that put the focus on people and their rights and needs rather than on the needs of economy.

CEV is an umbrella organization of currently 38 national, regional and local volunteer centres and volunteer development agencies in 22 countries of Europe. CEV is convinced that voluntary action is carried out by active and committed citizens and that it promotes participation in public affairs, which is vital for the preservation of democratic principles. It enables citizens of all nationalities, religions, socio-economic background, ability and ages to participate in the life of their local communities. This creates bonds of trust and fosters solidarity (i.e. it creates social capital) as well as promotes social inclusion and cohesion. Furthermore, volunteer exchanges of both the young and the old to other European countries have been shown to contribute to the development of a "European identity" among participants as well as active citizenship on return home. Volunteering is therefore central to European ideals of democracy, inclusion and active citizenship. Moreover, the exchange of knowledge and best practice between volunteer involving organisations throughout Europe needs a forum for partnership like CEV. Forums alike ensure that innovative projects emerge when different experiences and work approaches meet and interact. Consequently, volunteering and the activities of the European Volunteer Centre (and those of its members) are vital to many issues raised in the Green Paper.

We would like to raise the following general points:

- ***An ageing society and a growing number of elderly persons are not "a problem". The latter can actively contribute to society if this is promoted and fostered by policies and volunteer organisations. This requires a good supporting system, as well as guarantees for people getting engaged, by providing them insurances, even if they reach a certain age.***
- ***"Active ageing" should no longer be seen as ensuring that people work longer. It should be referring to active engagement of elderly beyond retirement – e.g. as volunteers.***
- ***Solidarity between generations can be achieved best by bringing persons together. A lot of volunteer organisations are making efforts on bridging generation gaps, to show that cooperation of people of different ages is possible and an asset. Volunteers of all ages helping each other are one way of doing this.***
- ***The role of volunteering to the different issues raised needs to be recognized:***

- **Volunteering in its various forms is a major tool for exploring, gaining and “updating” skills:** *Not only for young people with difficulties to follow formal school education or to enter the labour market, but also for persons of all ages when they want to re-enter the labour market.*
  - **Volunteering is also about social capital, social inclusion and social cohesion.**
  - **Volunteering is finally and most importantly about the well-being of a person and his her active participation in society.** *Through volunteering people of all ages can contributing to society – as well outside employment.*
- ***This recognition needs to lead to concrete action of both the EU and national governments to enable the existence of a support infrastructure for volunteering across Europe and a European network able to link between these support centres, channel between the volunteering reality in the Member States and the European Union and to contribute and work for a common understanding of volunteering in Europe.***

### 1.1. A low birth rate

The Commission is rightly pointing out that access to lifelong learning increases employment participation and, thus, productivity. Many couples and women in paid jobs choose today not to have children because they fear that a re-entry to the labor market would be difficult or impossible afterwards. An active strategy on Lifelong Learning that can counter this tendency, and especially non-formal and informal learning opportunities through volunteering should be taken into account.

**The European Union should see to it that**

- **Volunteering is recognized as a major tool to acquire skills and competences and, thus, a way of enhancing employability. Ways of giving informal and non-formal learning opportunities official recognition shall be explored at a European level.**

This can be particularly interesting for persons taking a break from work for childcare, as volunteering opportunities are flexible and can be tailored to the need to the mother or father. They can contribute to that a re-entry in the labour market will be facilitated.

### 1.2. The possible contribution of immigration

Immigration is presented as one way of mitigating the effect of the demographic changes over the next years. We very much agree that immigration can contribute to growth but should not be seen as an alternative to reform to face the challenges of our societies.

Immigration is a complex topic, and presenting it as a means of solving the EU's problems in this area seems to us to be dangerous: Immigrants should not be tackled with a pure “utility” criteria but should be seen as bearers of fundamental rights. We would not like to see a hierarchy between “useful” immigrants re-enforcing our labour market shortfalls and “not useful” immigrants that come to our countries.

Integration of immigrants is not only about labour market participation but also about social integration and social cohesion amongst the host societies and communities. Some immigrants might not be able to work immediately or even in a longer term: Long procedures of regularization, undocumented migrants and accompanying partners of migrants, often women are examples for this. But also those working right from the start need to be given ways of “socially” integrating to their host society.

A key issue in any form of migration is the nature of the relationship formed between the host community and the migrant and his/her family. We believe volunteering offers opportunities for people in the host community

and the migrant and/or migrant's family to work together on issues in their community of place or a community of interest. This is true for volunteers that get involved in helping migrants for example with language courses but more importantly for volunteering of migrants themselves. By doing so both the host community and the migrant and/or their family have an opportunity to achieve a crucial aspect of successful migration, namely to get to know one another. The assumption of fostering migrant volunteering is that it contributes to

- Acquaintance of certain skills migrants would need in the host community, especially the local language and the acquaintance with values, traditions and habits;
- The development of positive relationships between host community and the migrant and /or their family
- The diversity of peoples' different backgrounds and circumstances being appreciated and positively valued
- The development of a greater sense of belonging within a particular community by volunteering migrant and or a member of their family

CEV is currently involved in a Commission funded INTI project called INVOLVE that is exploring best practices and recommendations how migrant volunteering can be fostered and contribute to better integration. In 2006 we will publish our findings and target them towards European and national decision makers.

#### The European Union should

- **Acknowledge the powerful effect of volunteering on the inclusion and empowerment of migrants and investigate how to promote activities that will lead to a better understanding of the role and the impact of volunteer engagement on the integration of these groups.**
- **Promote with Member States a broad vision to integration of migrants that does not only focus on integration to the labour market but that puts a special focus on social integration.**
- **Foster the exchange of practices amongst Member State and promote the findings of the INVOLVE project in 2006.**

## 2. A new solidarity between the generations

"In the light of an ageing society and young persons facing the challenge of finding employment, new forms of solidarity must be developed between the generations, based on mutual support and the transfer of skills and experience". In many volunteer projects, new forms of intergenerational volunteering have been developed and stimulated the solidarity between generations. Young people helping the elderly to get acquainted with the Internet; elderly people learning youngster handicraft or mentoring them at school, etc.

The Volunteering landscape in Europe is very different according to age groups<sup>1</sup>: While in many Eastern European countries it is mainly young people that actively engage with their community, in many of the "older" Member States, people older then 35 are traditionally most represented. It is crucial to foster intergenerational projects in order to motivate young people and older people respectively to care about society.

#### The European Union should

- **Continue to put a special focus on the intergenerational approach in Action Programmes such as Active European Citizenship.**
- **Design special volunteer programmes in this respect: While we acknowledge the importance of the EU Youth Programme, we are convinced that the EU's volunteering programmes should be more inclusive and available for all ages;**

<sup>1</sup> see CEV report "Volunteering of all Ages – Summit of Generations"; May 2005, on <http://www.cev.be/Documents/ConferenceReportAllAges0505.pdf>

- **Foster the exchange of good practices between Member States on fostering intergenerational solidarity**

## 2.1. Better integration of young people

We agree that skills learnt at school are not always in line with the requirements of the knowledge society and the settings of formal education are not always appropriate to respond to special needs of pupils. The level of school failure speaks volumes about this. Volunteer projects are known to be innovative measures to support families and their school-age children. Not only do volunteers get involved in projects such as “tripartite” efforts together with teachers and the children to support them to catch up, in mentoring projects, simple homework support or giving language courses for migrant children. But volunteering of pupils itself as an “alternative” learning opportunity should be seen as one possible solution to meet this challenge. To do this informal and non-formal learning experiences need to be better recognized and their contribution to young people attaining the necessary skills researched, measured and acknowledged.

At the same time we would like to stress that we challenge the approach of the Commission that seems to emphasize the economic usefulness of young people, whose skills need to “meet the needs of the economy.” Learning is about forging personalities and should in the first place be shaped by the needs of the learner – just as the economy is to serve citizens and not the other way round. Getting involved in volunteering means precisely that young people identify what they are passionate about, choose an area they want to engage with and thereby acquire the skills they want to in an environment they have opted for.

It is clear that volunteering or any other form of non-formal or informal learning can and should not be seen as competing to formal education. But it can play an important complementary role, especially for youngsters at risks or with learning difficulties.

**In order for non-formal education and voluntary activities to play a meaningful role, we call on the European Commission to**

- **Strengthen its efforts to recognize and validate non-formal education and voluntary activities.**
- **Support certification schemes for volunteers aimed at recognizing the development of competencies through volunteering in the educational systems of the Member States and develop a European framework for validating informal and non-formal learning building upon the common principles already adopted by the Education, Youth and Culture Council in May 2004.** Some European countries are further in this respect than others.
- **Keep a special focus on ways of recognizing skills and competences in the major European Programmes dealing with this issue, such as the Programme on Life-Long Learning (Grundtvig)**
- **Keep and further develop programmes such as the European Voluntary Service Programme that bridge the gap between young persons school life and entry into the labour market.** Member States should be encouraged to support youth volunteering the framework of voluntary services as well at home – and together with the European Union the compatibility of national voluntary services and the EVS needs to be ensured.
- **European Programmes, such as the EVS and Active European Citizenship need to have a special focus on activities that include young and old volunteers.** There are uncountable volunteer activities in this area at local level – they need to be given a European dimension.
- **In the Open Method of Coordination on Education a special focus needs to be put on the role nonformal and informal learning and volunteering as one form of it.**

## 2.2. A global approach to “working life cycle”

While CEV acknowledges the shortage of labour in an ageing society and the need for reform in this regard we clearly challenge the Commission's approach to "active ageing". People beyond retirement are very able to make a useful contribution to society (see 2.3.) and we do not want to see this important notion to refrain to "work longer". At the same time, many of these people are already "active" in volunteering. The EU should avoid to spread the idea that elderly people are not active presenting "active ageing" as a new concept.

➤ **The European Commission should stop using the notion of "Active Ageing" to merely describe the fact that people should work longer. Active Ageing is about elderly and very elderly being active citizens, about engagement and participation – and not only about being employed after 65.**

### 2.3. A new place for "elderly people"

Referring to the above-mentioned we fully agree that the place of "elderly people" has to be redefined as they live longer and are in better health as previous elderly generations. These people have acquired a high level of knowledge, expertise and a broad vision of society and its changes over the years. It would be unreasonable not to tap this enormous reservoir for society once these persons are retired. Voluntary activity is a way in which these persons are still active, contribute to society with their experience and still feel connected. However, supporting volunteering of older persons is not only about making the best out of them for society – but about social inclusion and cohesion and about solidarity: Society owes these people to care about them and to give them an opportunity of still feeling "useful".

The ageing society is a challenge as well for the volunteer sector. In most parts of Western Europe it is already persons from 30 to 44 and the retired that volunteer. Experience shows that people that have volunteered at a younger age will do so as well when retired. A challenge will thus be to recruit elderly people who haven't been volunteering before. With the rise of the average age, the volunteer landscape and the reservoir of people likely to volunteer will change significantly. This means, that volunteer support organizations will have to think about the approach they take in recruiting, managing and awarding volunteers.

In many Central and Eastern European countries on the other hand it is predominantly the youth who volunteer: Volunteering is with older people very often still linked to their negative experience under the socialist regimes, where volunteering was seen as an "obligatory" contribution" to society. Additionally, due to material penury volunteering is quite often not a realistic option for the elderly to spend their time.

Different practices have been developed by volunteer organisation to ensure that elderly people, especially after retirement, will be still active:

- **Enhance employee volunteering**, especially in the "pre-pension" period as this will raise the likeliness of people to volunteer thereafter and still have a social context (e.g. if they are through their voluntary activity still in contact with their ex-colleagues);
- **Target volunteer recruitment specifically to this age group** and tailoring volunteer opportunities to their needs and competences;
- **Develop award systems for older (and younger) volunteers** and
- Ensure that **legal provisions such as insurances for volunteers are not discriminatory towards older volunteers**;
- Strengthen efforts especially in countries of Central and Eastern Europe to **raise awareness with older people on the value of volunteering** and the positive impact it can have on their lives;
- **Exchange practice** amongst volunteer organizations on "volunteering for all ages" as happened at the CEV conference in May 2005 in Cluj, Romania

**We urge the European Commission to**

- **Support activities and networks that target the specific needs of older volunteers and that enable them to participate in society;**
- **Foster amongst Member States the exchange of practices in this regard and present best practices that foster participation of the elderly in volunteering activities;**
- **Promote active citizenship beyond retirement as a crucial element for an inclusive society at a European level.**

#### **2.4. Solidarity with the very elderly (80+)**

Many of the above-mentioned issues apply for this age group if we talk about persons that are still active and wanting to engage in volunteering. At the same time, volunteering plays a decisive role when it comes to work *with* this age group: Many volunteers across Europe are active in care – at the old person's home or in retirement homes. There are many examples of innovative volunteer projects aiming at recruiting volunteers for the elderly or handicapped people in their neighbourhood. This prevents isolation, loneliness, and ensures that those very elderly people can live longer on their own and not in care facilities. At the same time, this kind of projects fosters intergenerational solidarity referred to earlier in this document. Volunteers cannot replace paid health care personnel but can play a complementary role when it comes to care about these people and to create social cohesion between age groups. This activity is learning opportunity for both parts involved: The volunteer that profits from the experience and the horizon of the old person and learns about respect and mutual understanding. The old person transmits his or her knowledge and profits on his or her turn from the volunteer's approach to society and learns about how other generations feel about its development.

Volunteers have been involved in making new technologies more accessible to older and very old people. The World Summit on Information Society to be hold in Tunis 2005 is looking into ways of enhancing this kind of volunteering support. New technologies such as the Internet can contribute to fight isolation.

#### **We call on the European Union to**

- **Put a special emphasis on the recognition of work with elderly and very elderly people on a voluntary basis as a means of forging solidarity and of social cohesion**
- **Translate this focus into priorities in European Action programmes such as Active Citizenship and Life-Long Learning**