



CEV Position Paper on the Economic and Financial Crisis

The global economic and financial crisis has an enormous impact on all sectors of society, be it business or public spending; and also on individuals and organisations of civil society. Recession affects almost everyone and strikes within all spheres of society. The current call on volunteering in this time of crisis needs to be dealt with cautiously. Volunteering is a powerful tool for easing the effects of crises. However, all stakeholders involved need to be aware of the challenges and pitfalls of the impacts of the current crises on the volunteering landscape.

CEV's vision is a Europe in which volunteering is central in building a cohesive and inclusive society based on solidarity and active citizenship. As the European network of volunteer centres and volunteer support organisations with now 83 member organisations in 33 countries reaching out to over 17,000 organisations at a local level, we work to create an enabling political, social and economic environment in Europe for the full potential of volunteering to be realized.

Through dialogue with our membership organisations CEV acknowledges what appears to be a significant rise in volunteering in several EU countries. Volunteering can appear to serve as an immediate alternative for persons facing unexpected unemployment, allowing them to keep up their competences, to develop new skills, to maintain the important sense of purpose and belonging to the local community and to create social ties and networks. Volunteering raises the employability of individuals in this sense. Many voluntary activities are, in their essence, social events of mutual encounter and facilitating feeling useful and making a contribution. The impact of these activities on the personal wellbeing and the avoidance of alienation and depression should be emphasised.

CEV also highlights the fact that volunteering creates economic value: for every 1 € invested in volunteering, volunteers and their organisations provide services and create value of up to 13,5¹ times as much. While this value is rarely counted, and while CEV does understand concerns about the monetarisation of voluntary activities, many studies show that the economic contribution of volunteers and volunteer organisation is massive – and that investment in volunteering is efficient and effective.

While acknowledging these benefits, we also wish to avoid the abuse of volunteering, therefore CEV calls on all societal stakeholders to sign up to the following guiding principles for volunteering:

- 1) Volunteering, as an unpaid activity carried out of free will, must not be a substitute for paid work. It is unacceptable to look at volunteering and/or volunteers as a cheap alternative to replace workforce, or to abuse the

¹ *Valuing volunteers in Europe*. A comparative study of the Volunteer Investment and Value Audit.
<http://www.voluntaryaction.info/euroviva.htm>

altruistic motivation of volunteers to undercut wages. Paid and unpaid work are complementary and mutually reinforcing, not antagonists.

- 2) Though there may be a growth in the level of volunteering during the economic crisis, the volunteer sector cannot be expected to tackle the overall problem of unemployment within the countries. Volunteering does not discharge policymakers and social partners of their duties of ensuring decent jobs for the active population. Volunteer organisations' role is to support and enable quality volunteering; not to serve as employment agencies.
- 3) Volunteering should be recognized for its own dynamic and its intrinsic values and characteristics. It builds cohesion in our societies, fosters connections of individuals between each other and to society – and is the manifestation of solidarity and expression of active citizenship out of free will and motivation of citizens. While volunteering has manifold positive side effects on the individual and on society at large we must avoid the temptation of using it for aims and objectives that are not at the core of what volunteering is about: Volunteers must not be abused to step in as a last resort where government ceases activities or stops providing resources.
- 4) An inviolate principle of volunteering decrees that any attempt to make voluntary activities obligatory is a contradiction in itself. We call on policy makers not to undermine the value of volunteering by instituting any kind of forced civic engagement or to 'steer' people into 'volunteering'. These will have the counter effect of blurring the concepts and losing the positive drive and energy of volunteers.
- 5) Volunteering, while freely given, is not cost free. The organisations of the volunteering infrastructure need to be resourced to support quality volunteering opportunities and experiences and to enable specifically those citizens to volunteer that are usually not involved. These include people from deprived backgrounds, experiencing poverty or social exclusion. Cuts in the voluntary sector will have a devastating impact on the availability and the quality of volunteer opportunities.

CEV sees therefore the need to have a permanent dialogue between all related stakeholders, to avoid wrong or incompatible expectations towards volunteering and to ensure that volunteering is not misused as an instrument, a solution for failing structures or economical systems facing problems and difficulties.

Volunteering shows its strengths and potential best when it is seen as what it has always been: a way of citizens to express and live in solidarity and, thus, to create social cohesion, with all the positive effects it has on the personal wellbeing and on the health of society overall. In this way, it will play its role in overcoming the current financial and economic crisis.

European Volunteer Centre (CEV), December 2010.