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The European Volunteer Centre (CEV) is writing in response to the consultation for the white paper on a European Communication Policy. Firstly, we welcome the European Commission's efforts of putting this crucial topic on the agenda. CEV considers the bridging of the information and communication gap between the European Union and its citizens as a long outstanding issue that is now rightly tackled by the Commission.

CEV is an umbrella organisation, representing a network of national, regional and local volunteer centres working on EU policy level and networking between our members.

CEV agrees with the Commission that information and communication policy is a policy in its own right. In this regard, CEV stresses that a **European Communication Policy should follow a two-pronged approach**. It should firstly aim at keeping the EU's citizens properly and continually informed about the functioning and activities of the EU's institutions. This is necessary in order to develop the citizens' knowledge and to encourage their participation. Secondly, ways for an active participation of citizens have to be provided. That is when citizens will really feel connected to Europe: When they have the feeling that their voice is heard and taken serious – and when they get the feeling that they actually make Europe happen through their intercultural activities. High level events such as Volunteer Assemblies and projects that bring citizens together (physically or through the net) can deliver this approach of a "tangible Europe"

Question 2: Empowering citizens - How to reach out to the citizen?

CEV is convinced that one important pillar of a successful EU communication and information policy should consist of **identifying privileged target groups** in the population that can function as **multipliers**. Identifying these groups can considerably facilitate the EU's objective to reach out to its citizens.

People that devote their time to voluntary activities constitute such an important group, when communicating the European Union and its institutions. Volunteers do care about societal issues and they do so mainly at the local level. They are inspired by a wish to make a positive contribution to society and, thus, possess a **high degree of receptiveness for issues that relate to their political and social environment**. Volunteers themselves are a heterogeneous group representing active citizens from different backgrounds. But what is more, communication efforts aimed at this group, easily leads to multiplier effects. They work e.g. with young people, with the elderly and with disabled and interact with parts of society that are often difficult to approach through conventional channels, such as people facing social exclusion and migrants. Developing strategies in order to reach out to these parts of the population, and facilitate the flow of information from the EU to these groups and vice versa needs to be given a prominent place in an emerging EU communication policy – volunteers can play a crucial role here.

Volunteer organisations and their members in this respect possess a comparative advantage, being active citizens receptive about political and social issues and working with a broad range of different people from different parts of society at the same time.

CEV agrees that empowering citizens through education is a **crucial element of a European communication policy**. Improving civic education is one important approach. CEV points to the fact that the EU has not much competence in the field of education. CEV, however, encourages the Commission to work towards an anchoring of EU issues in the curricula of the Member States.

But it needs to be guaranteed that the focus must not be confined to formal education since many **European citizens learn in informal and non-formal settings**. In this regard, the educational value of volunteering in various areas should be recognized especially when designing EU programmes in the area of communication and out reach to citizens.. Learning about Europe in school and at university is one thing. But feeling and experiencing Europe another: Volunteer projects such as the European Volunteer Service or exchange projects between volunteers engaged at local level are crucial tools to make active European citizens feel the European spirit meeting likeminded people engaged in similar activities which they usually are not in contact with. Connecting these people with each other, through networks such as CEV, can stimulate debates and discussions about European issues. **Volunteer assemblies** on an annual basis, bringing together volunteers

from all over Europe can be in this context one stimulating forum for exchange and discussion. That is when citizens will really feel connected to Europe: When they have the feeling that their voice is heard and taken serious – and when they get the feeling that they actually make Europe happen through their intercultural activities.

Question 3:

Working with the media and new technologies - How to involve the media, including new technologies, more effectively in communicating on Europe?

CEV believes that giving Europe a face can be achieved by **personal engagement of representatives of the EU institutions**. CEV has in this respect made good experiences at its conferences with the presence of representatives from the EU institutions. This is of great importance since participants often have a first contact with a “European face” at these conferences and then go back to their national and local levels, **taking along and communicating their gained experience of the human face** that lies behind the otherwise anonymous EU institution. Such an enhanced personal engagement of EU officials and representatives could become a cornerstone of a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication.

Volunteers also play an important role in projects related to Life Long Learning, particularly in relation to providing IT education for elderly people.

Closing the digital divide is a challenge that has been taken over for a long time already by by volunteers. A lot of work has been done to enable for instance elderly or marginalized people to access new technologies such as the Internet. Many young people get engaged in teaching Internet courses for elderly citizens on a volunteer basis. The success does not only lie in the fact that elderly people get educated in the new Information and Communication Technologies. Rather, these projects are also successful from a social perspective, bringing together citizens from different generations. Furthermore, by teaching adults, young people gain valuable experience and knowledge that provide them with competences and skills for their future professional lives.

Additionally, volunteers do engage using ICT as a means: “Cybervolunteer” communities organize themselves in Europe – and are an easy identifiable target for information and dissemination policies of the European Commission.

Question 4:

Understanding European public opinion - What more can be done to gauge European opinion?

One option of understanding European public opinion better would be the setting up of the above mentioned Volunteer Assemblies (Question 2). Active citizens from various backgrounds can discuss EU politics, together with representatives from the EU institutions. They represent a picture of the wider society and need to have the feeling that their voice and deliberations are heard at European level.

Web-based discussion forums set up by civil society organisations also bear a huge potential for citizens involvement. Formats such as ‘Have your Say’ where people can comment and discuss their views on a broad spectrum of European issues – issues selected by civil society organisations and that European citizens really do care about. Civil Society organisations know their constituencies and can help to trigger interesting debates amongst them that links them to the European project.

EU programmes like the European Volunteer Service, Socrates and Erasmus also play an important role. They provide the EU with a **network of people that gained hands on experience of European issues**. When planning appropriate information and communication strategies, the EU should approach already existing networks or set up new ones in order to extract best practice and stimulate debates on European

issues. This would also contribute to giving the EU a more human face (see Question 3) – ‘ordinary’ citizens that practically experienced Europe can facilitate communication efforts considerably.

Reaching out to the citizens **must not convey the impression that it is elite-driven**. This is how the EU is currently often perceived. This should be considered during the planning stage of every communication and information policy. In order to reach out to “ordinary citizens” and persons that do not engage in public debates (and even less in European debates), civil society organisations play an important role – and volunteers can be mediators.

Question 5:

Doing the job together - How will the partnership between the key actors, i.e. member states, EU institutions, local and regional authorities, political parties and civil society organizations, work?

CEV underlines the importance of connecting the local level to the EU public sphere. In this context, volunteers represent a big reservoir of active European citizens engaged at local level. It is therefore important to connect volunteers in different Member States with each other - and to connect volunteers with the European public sphere. CEV as a European network of national, regional and local volunteer centres can play a prominent role in delivering on both objectives. We, thus, believe that communication needs to be addressed at **networks and organisation that are acting at the European level**, representing national organisations that in turn often represent considerable numbers of EU citizens. Contacts rarely take place directly between the citizens’ and the EU. Rather, communication flows through channels such as these networks. These organisations can link citizens with each other as well as link citizens and the EU’s institutions. Therefore it is necessary to make available sufficient support to enable such organisations to engage their constituencies in debates across the EU.

CEV considers the **role of European networks and civil society organisation as two pronged**: On the one hand, networks and organisations can encourage, facilitate and receive citizens’ participation. This is due to their often well-developed infrastructure in many EU Member States and their subsequent opportunity to reach very often directly to the local level.

On the other hand, organisations such as CEV possess the opportunity to represent the channelled participation efforts and concerns of considerable parts of the EU’s citizens.

Question 6:

New ideas and general comments

In CEV’s view, the Commission should consider supporting volunteer- run projects that are aimed at **presenting EU related information in an understandable and descriptive manner**. These projects are often run in the Internet and represent good examples of ‘citizens for citizens’ activities. One example for such a high quality information project that is run by volunteers is Europa-Digital (www.europa-digital.de). This website is solely run on a volunteer basis. The innovative aspect lies in its ability to present EU information in a differentiated but descriptive manner.

EU communication and information policy can also be conducted by relying on such non-governmental partners that have already an expertise in communication European issues. Political ‘peer education’, conducted from citizens for citizens bear a huge potential for a lively and active European society. Through such projects, citizens feel closer to the EU and can bridge the European with the local level.

This is of crucial importance because it makes citizens to adopt European issues as their own concerns.

