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EUROPEAN VOLUNTEER CENTRE (CEV) GENERAL ASSEMBLY, STIRLING, SCOTLAND, 29 MAY 2004

VOLUNTEERING AND THE NEW TECHNOLOGIES: INITIATIVES, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

On 29 May 2004, European Volunteer Centre (CEV) network members met in the historic city of Stirling, Scotland to look at the issue of: ***Volunteering and the new technologies: Initiatives, opportunities and challenges.***

In the light of the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) held in 2003 (and the creation of a "volunteer family"), along with the significant investment throughout Europe in the new Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) as a core element to strengthen the volunteering infrastructure, delegates were given a chance to learn from each other and to explore some of the challenges faced by the volunteering sector.

Mr. Christopher Spence, CEV President, opened the General Assembly by congratulating the host organisation Volunteer Development Scotland (VDS) on their 20th anniversary and by acknowledging the relevance of the new computer suite in the VDS headquarters; showing the importance of the new technologies, and of fully understanding their capabilities in the context of volunteerism. This seminar, he hoped, would inspire delegates to make the most of information technologies in their own operations.

Viola Krebs, Director of International Conference Volunteers, introduced her presentation by discussing the relationship between volunteerism and ICT. She claimed that volunteers have helped to build, and continually shape, the Information Society that we live in today. Their fundamental role can be seen in the development of software, the building of an inclusive information society, and in the advance in new forms and promotion of volunteering. Viola then went on to talk about the World Summit on the Information Society and the formation of the "volunteer family". The recommendations put forward by the volunteer family include organisation of events to mobilise local and national networks, promotion of ICT-volunteer projects, research to measure impact and networking with other actors – including those at all levels of governance and operation. She asked the CEV network to help the cause by contributing its case studies, statistics, experiences and ideas.

Laura McKenna, Digital Inclusion Team (Scotland), followed Viola with an overview of the Scottish approach to the "digital divide". The Scottish Executive Digital Inclusion strategy was presented, including the overall aim "to ensure universal access to digital technologies by 2005". Laura gave details about the main themes running through the strategy and stressed the importance of the volunteer effort in achieving the strategy's aims. Expanding on this point, she said that local people were emerging as the best 'champions' for use of personal computers, by volunteering to help their friends, family and neighbours on an informal basis. Inter-generational interaction is encouraged, by training younger people to train older persons, or members of their family. This has not only helped with intergenerational relations, it has also made the young people understand how hard their teachers work! Laura also mentioned the importance of

employee volunteering to the success of the strategy, the development of online volunteering and the "Digital Buddies" scheme that has been set-up. A Digital Buddy helps others to overcome their initial fear of new technologies through a series of informal meetings.

Liz Burns, President of the International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE), continued along the same theme of the 'digital divide', but on a global level. She welcomed the delegates into the "Digital Age", and said that it provides an excellent opportunity for volunteering to develop. Liz explained that the digital divide is all about the difference between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. She emphasised the importance of trying to limit this divide wherever it appears; whether within a family, a community, or the world as a whole. She explained that in the context of the WSIS (where the divide was recognised as a major global challenge, with potentially serious effects on world stability), CEV, ICVolunteers, United Nations Volunteers and IAVE had begun planning a research study to focus on the efforts of volunteers to close the divide, initially concentrating on the situation in Europe. She concluded her inspiring speech by underlining the priority of addressing the digital divide issue now, as it affects so many issues at a global level.

CEV members then had the opportunity to discuss their personal experiences of ICT, and how they have used them in the context of volunteering, through participation in a number of workshops. These workshops were used as an opportunity to discuss the challenges faced, ways to overcome these challenges and what the future might look like in the members' countries:

It was agreed that ICT have helped many members to provide their services in a cost-effective way, and that matching/recruitment initiatives have only worked because they are based on updated, reliable databases. These initiatives can help in targeting potential volunteers in underrepresented sections of society, but delegates were also keen to stress that ICT should not completely replace the face-to-face volunteer support service offered by their organisations.

Delegates recognised that 'online volunteering' is a big growth in many European countries, most likely because it allows a wider range of people to volunteer, from a wide variety of locations. The younger generation is readily taking to the concept, as well as older volunteers. ICT can truly support the development and diversification of volunteer networks - web based volunteer recruitment is particularly important because there are many who may wish to volunteer, who may not want/be able to visit a volunteer centre.

Delegates agreed that ICT as a method of communicating with stakeholders are an important step forward from traditional communication methods because of the instantaneous nature of information transfer – leading to improved interaction with stakeholders. Websites are also becoming an important tool for voicing the concerns of volunteers, and for promoting the value of volunteering.

In terms of looking towards the future, Information and Communication Technologies are seen as an essential tool in the development of volunteering. ICT provide a massive market for online learning, new opportunities for combating exclusion in volunteering, more efficient means for communication with all those interested in the sector and another platform to promote the importance of volunteer effort. Some delegates are already knowledgeable about how to benefit from ICT, but all delegates admitted that they still have much to learn. Challenges that need to be addressed include making sure that those without access to the ICT are not ignored by the volunteer sector, and ensuring that the importance, for some volunteers, of face-to-face personal contact does not disappear with the continued use of the new technologies.

Notes:

The European Volunteer Centre (CEV) is the European association of national and regional volunteer centres. 32 centres are currently members across more than 20 countries of Europe. CEV channels the collective "voice" of its members to the institutions of the European Union. It also acts as a central forum for the exchange of information, policy and practice. CEV is also involved in research and capacity-building of its members.

Volunteer Development Scotland, Stirling is a full member of CEV, and hosted this General Assembly in Scotland. CEV would like to thank VDS for all their hard work to make this event an enormous success, and in particular Lesley Greenaway. The mission of VDS is to learn about the 'Volunteer Landscape' of Scotland, and serve within an international context as the National Centre of Excellence to appreciate and maximise the positive impacts of volunteering on individuals, groups, organisations, communities and society. For further information, see: www.vds.org.uk or contact information@vds.org.uk

For further information on the European Volunteer Centre, or to receive a copy of the **Manifesto for Volunteering in Europe**, see: <http://www.cev.be/> or contact: cev@cev.be

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