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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-
border Voluntary Activities in the EU**

1. INTRODUCTION

Volunteering is a creator of human and social capital. It is a pathway to integration and employment and a key factor for improving social cohesion. Above all, volunteering translates the fundamental values of justice, solidarity, inclusion and citizenship upon which Europe is founded into action. Volunteers help shape European society, and volunteers who work outside of their home countries are actively helping to build a Citizens' Europe.¹ Indeed, volunteering activities are implicitly linked with many European Union policy areas – such as lifelong learning, rural development and sport – where they add a valuable dimension to European Union programmes.

For all these reasons and more, the year 2011 has been designated as the European Year of Voluntary Activities promoting Active Citizenship.² The European Year gives the European Commission the opportunity to take stock of volunteering in the European Union and its contribution to society. It also allows the Commission to evaluate what the European Union and Member States can do to facilitate and promote volunteering, notably in cross-border situations.

Following this Communication, and before the end of 2012, a report assessing the Year's outcomes will be submitted to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

1.1. Definition and data situation

When it comes to volunteering, each country has different notions, definitions and traditions. Volunteering is defined as all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal. Volunteers act under their own free will, according to their own choices and motivations and do not seek financial gain. Volunteering is a journey of solidarity and a way for individuals and associations to identify and address human, social or environmental needs and concerns. Volunteering is often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation or community-based initiative.³

A Commission-initiated study estimated that in 2010 some 100 million Europeans are engaged in voluntary activities. Behind this overall figure, peoples' participation in volunteering varies widely across the EU.⁴

In many EU Member States, adults aged between 30 and 50 years are the most active in volunteering, although the number of younger and older volunteers is increasing across the EU.

Volunteering takes place in many sectors. The biggest area for volunteering is sport, followed by social care, welfare and health. Other sectors include justice, culture, education, youth,

¹ EU Citizenship Report 2010 – Dismantling the obstacles to EU citizen's rights, COM (2010) 603 final of 27 October 2010.

² Council Decision No 37/2010/EC on the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (2011) of 27 November 2009, OJ L 17, 22.1.2010, p. 43–49.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Volunteering in the European Union" (GHK 2010).

environment and climate action, consumer protection, humanitarian aid, development policy and equal opportunities.

Volunteering also has a great impact beyond national borders. Cross-border volunteering has great potential for education, employment and citizenship. It can also improve mutual understanding and contribute to the development of a stronger European identity.

1.2. Challenges for volunteering

On the basis of a study of eight industrialised countries by the Johns Hopkins University⁵ and the experience of the European Year 2011 so far, we have identified the potential obstacles to volunteering, in particular across borders, as the following:

- **Lack of a clear legal framework:** Almost one in five Member States does not have a clear legal framework and clear rules for volunteers and volunteering.
- **Lack of national strategies for promoting voluntary activities:** National volunteering strategies need to be created to cover the following aspects: training, holiday benefits, social security, entitlement to unemployment benefits for cross-border volunteering activities, accommodation and reimbursements of out-of-pocket expenses.
- **Financial constraints:** Volunteering, while freely given, is not cost free. Organisations based on voluntary activity often face a lack of sustainable funding, and competition for available funds is fierce.
- **Mismatch between supply and demand:** The increasing trend to professionalise the volunteering sector causes a certain mismatch between the needs of volunteering organisations and the aspirations of new volunteers. Volunteers are available for short-term projects while organisations need people to make long-term commitments.
- **Lack of recognition:** Skills that are gained through volunteering activities are not always sufficiently recognised or given credit.
- **Tax obstacles:** Member States apply different tax treatments to volunteers' income/allowances and to the reimbursement of the expenses sustained during their service. Consequently, volunteers may encounter tax obstacles when operating across borders.
- **Insufficient data:** Better comparable data on volunteering in the Member States can help identify best practices and improve policy making.

Member States made some progress on these issues in 2006 when they committed to cooperating on overcoming obstacles that directly or indirectly impede the mobility of EU

⁵ "Volunteering in the European Union" (GHK 2010).

citizens for learning or professional development purposes, including volunteering.⁶ But there is still a lot of work to do. Particular attention needs to be paid to the promotion of an environment for volunteering activities providing equal opportunities with regard to the access and participation of all individuals.

1.3. The added value of volunteering

Volunteering contributes to the Europe 2020 growth strategy,⁷ in particular to the EU's employment rate target of 75% by 2020, by helping people learn new skills and adapt to changes in the labour market. The above mentioned Johns Hopkins University study found that the voluntary sector can contribute up to 5% of Gross Domestic Product.⁸ This can be very important during times of economic difficulty and austerity. Solidarity is also increased through volunteering, when people learn how to adapt to technological change, globalisation and the ageing population.

Volunteering directly contributes to key objectives of EU policies such as social inclusion, employment, education, skills development and citizenship. Its positive effects are confirmed by new indicators that measure social cohesion or the happiness, connectedness, activeness and well-being of volunteers.⁹ This applies also to volunteering in knowledge-intensive areas, such as education and research, including in international cooperation.

The European Union's involvement in volunteering issues brings tangible benefits. These are most obvious in the promotion of cross-border volunteering and the mobility of volunteers in the European Union. More generally, the European Union can be a catalyst for policy development in volunteering in the years to come, which, in line with the subsidiarity principle, would take place at Member State level in the light of national priorities and the overall strategic objectives of the European Union for the decade ahead.

The following chapter outlines the ways in which the Commission currently supports the volunteering sector and how it plans to address the issues raised in the future.

2. EUROPEAN POLICIES AND VOLUNTEERING

2.1. EU funding opportunities for volunteering

The European institutions have long acknowledged the significance of voluntary organisations in making it possible for people to give something back to their communities and in providing opportunities for citizen participation in a broader European context. As such, the EU currently offers funding opportunities for volunteers and voluntary activities within the following programmes:

⁶ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on transnational mobility within the Community for education and training purposes: European Charter of Mobility, Doc. 2006/961/EC.

⁷ Communication from the Commission. Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, COM (2010) 2020 final of 3 March 2010.

⁸ "[Measuring Civil Society and Volunteering](#)" (Johns Hopkins University 2007).

⁹ Cf. S. Hossenfelder, On the problem of measuring happiness, (February 3, 2011). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1754423> who refers also to the research of the International Commission on the measurement of economic performance and social progress established by the French President in 2008 and the recent approach of the British Office for National Statistics to measure people's well being.

Within the "Youth in Action" programme,¹⁰ the European Voluntary Service (EVS) offers young people between the ages of 18 and 30 the opportunity to carry out voluntary work, for up to 12 months, outside their home country. Beyond benefiting local communities, the EVS offers volunteers the opportunity to acquire new skills, learn languages and discover other cultures.

The European Voluntary Service gave Costica, 27, a visually impaired Romanian, the opportunity to spend four and half months as a volunteer at the IRHOV school for visually impaired children in Liège, Belgium. Costica ran computer, sports and cultural workshops for children and was able to develop personal, social and professional skills through the experience. At the same time, Costica provided important support to the hosting community by being a role-model for visually-impaired children, and acting as an inspiration for their parents and the school staff. In this respect, volunteering with EVS is a way of being active in society and expressing solidarity among young Europeans, while enhancing one's employability.

The EU's Europe for Citizens programme¹¹ supports a wide range of activities and organisations promoting European citizenship, such as through town-twinning projects. Particular attention is paid within this programme to the promotion of volunteering. Indeed, volunteering has been set as a programme priority for 2011.

The "Charter of European Rural communities" (CERC) funded by the Europe for Citizens programme is a co-operation between 27 small rural communities, one from each EU Member State. CERC's activities are geared towards creating opportunities to "meet each other at the kitchen table," giving European citizens the possibility to interact at a cross-border, people-to-people level, while exploring themes and cooperating in areas such as participation in local democracy, the role of young people in local democracy and the well-being of senior citizens. The activities rely heavily on the support of volunteers helping with the organisation of CERC events and finding accommodation for invited guests in the host location.

The Lifelong Learning Programme¹² includes the Grundtvig programme which promotes the participation of European citizens in volunteering projects in a European country other than their own, allowing them to learn and share their knowledge and experience across borders.

The Manchester Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts of Budapest developed a Grundtvig Senior Volunteer Project focusing on the inclusion of people aged 50 years and over. At the core of the project was an exchange programme, where six volunteers from both museums took part in crossover visits to each museum and had the opportunity to volunteer in a different country. This project has created a platform to share best practices amongst museums working with volunteers in different European countries.

In addition to the programmes targeting volunteers and voluntary activities directly, the EU offers a wide range of funding programmes accessible to volunteers in the fields of food

¹⁰ Decision No 1719/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006, OJ L 327, 24.11.2006, p. 30–44.

¹¹ Decision No 1904/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2006, OJ L 378, 27.12.2006, p. 32–40.

¹² Decision No. 1720/2006/EC of the Parliament and of the Council of November 15 2006, OJ L 327 of 24.11.2006, p.45.

distribution, social exclusion and discrimination, gender equality, drugs prevention, helping victims of crime,¹³ public health, consumer protection and the environment and climate action.

The Commission is committed to raising awareness amongst EU Citizens and stakeholders about different funding programmes that can be used by volunteers and for voluntary activities. This will ensure that funding opportunities for the volunteering sector are fully exploited.

2.2. The societal dimension of volunteering

2.2.1. Volunteering as an expression of European citizenship

Volunteering is closely linked to the Commission's general political objectives of reinforcing Union citizenship and putting citizens at the heart of EU policy-making.¹⁴ Volunteering can complement citizens' entitlements to rights and promote their active participation in society. This is particularly the case for cross-border volunteering, which has the potential for inter-cultural learning and the development of a European identity.

In addition, volunteering is an element of social innovation that can mobilise people's creativity to develop solutions and make better use of scarce resources.¹⁵

The Commission will continue to support the volunteering sector through its funding programmes and through EU cohesion policy programmes in various policy areas.

It will follow up on initiatives promoting cross-border volunteering in the context of the 2013 European Year of Citizens.

2.2.2. Volunteers hold society together

Volunteering fosters social cohesion and social inclusion. Volunteering implies sharing and helping others, and in this way develops solidarity. Voluntary activities increase peoples' tolerance towards disadvantaged groups in society and help reduce racism and prejudice.

Volunteering has also been recognised as a way of offering new learning opportunities to senior citizens and people with disabilities while giving them the possibility to help shape our societies. At the same time, voluntary activities can improve understanding between generations when the young and old work together and support each other.

At the individual level, volunteering can be a means for citizens to acquire social skills, to play a useful role and to connect or re-connect with society. At the societal level, it can be a tool for the empowerment of people, especially for disadvantaged groups in society.

¹³ Over 20,000 volunteers work for victim support organisations in Europe (Strengthening victim's rights in the EU, COM(2011) 274 final of 18.05.2011, p. 5).

¹⁴ "Political Guidelines for the next Commission (2009-2014)" (2009).

¹⁵ "Empowering people, driving change: Social innovation in the European Union" (BEPA 2010). Supported by the 7th Research Framework Programme the European Commission intends to support the set up of a 'Social Platform' for innovative social services that will also address the role of volunteering in the service sector.

Equally, environmental volunteering plays a major role in protecting and improving the environment for present and future generations while at the same time increasing awareness of environmental issues and the likelihood of carrying out environmentally friendly practices.¹⁶ For instance, in the UK, the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) works with over 300,000 volunteers each year and in Slovakia, environmental volunteering accounts for 13.3% of the total share of volunteering.¹⁷

In order to raise awareness and tackle the problem of marine litter in our seas and oceans, the international Surfrider Foundation organises the annual "Ocean Initiatives: the largest eco-citizens' rally in Europe", involving 40,000 volunteers spread across more than 1,000 clean-up activities of beaches, lakes, rivers and the ocean-floor in Europe and the rest of the world.¹⁸

The Commission may introduce proposals that specifically cater for volunteering in the EU's employment strategy, in its fight against poverty and social exclusion and in the context of the Commission's "New Skills for New Jobs" initiative.

2.2.3. *Education and volunteering*

Voluntary activities can form either structured learning activities (so-called non-formal learning) in which the volunteer intentionally participates or unintentional and unstructured learning (so-called informal learning). In both cases, volunteers' learning usually is not certified. Recognising volunteering as a form of learning is therefore a priority of EU action in education and training. Based on common principles adopted by the Council in 2004¹⁹, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Cedefop, published 'European guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning', which provide a tool for the development of certification practices that also take account of the voluntary sector.

Mobility for learning purposes is a way in which citizens exercise their right of free movement within the EU. Cross-border volunteering is an example of such learning mobility.

The Commission is working on a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning that includes the volunteering dimension.

On a practical level, voluntary work experience and skills acquired through volunteering can be displayed in the Europass documents²⁰ and will be integrated into the future 'European Skills Passport'.

¹⁶ Volunteering and environment:

http://community.cev.be/download/130/434/Fact_sheet_DG_ENV_environment.pdf

¹⁷ CSVnet – National Coordination Body of Voluntary Support Centres, 2009. 'Brief compendium of the research: Volunteering across Europe. Organisations, promotion, participation', p. 17.

¹⁸ Initiatives océanes press kit 2011: http://www.surfrider.eu/fileadmin/documents/io11/dp/20110228_DP-IO2011_EN.pdf

¹⁹ Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (May 2004).

²⁰ Decision 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on a single Community framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences (Europass), OJ L 390, 31.12.2004, p. 6–20.

2.2.4. *Youth and volunteering*

The active participation of young people in society can be fostered through volunteering. If young people are well informed about volunteering and have positive experiences when volunteering, they are likely to continue to be active volunteers throughout their life, inspiring other young people to volunteer in their wake.

The Commission has chosen voluntary activities for youths as one of the priorities of the youth policy cooperation process that was launched in 2001, as well as the subsequent Open Method of Coordination on youth. Within the new EU Strategy for Youth, volunteering has been recognised as one of the key policy areas affecting Europe's young people.²¹

The Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers seeks to boost cooperation between organisers of voluntary activities in the EU Member States. It invites civil society organisations and public authorities to develop voluntary activities and to open up these activities to young people from other EU countries.²²

Youth volunteering supports the 'Youth on the Move' flagship initiative²³ of the Europe 2020 Strategy, putting young people at the centre of the EU's vision of an economy based on knowledge, innovation, high levels of education and skills, inclusive labour markets and active involvement in society.

In 2012, Member States will report back to the Commission on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy and the Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU. On this basis, the Commission will make proposals for further development.

2.2.5. *Sport and volunteering*

Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union calls on the EU to take account of structures based on voluntary activities when promoting European sport.

In 2002, Member States recognised the significant contribution of voluntary activity to sport and its economic value in the "Aarhus Declaration on Voluntary Work in Sport". Volunteering was also one of the key issues in the Commission's 2007 White Paper on Sport which found that voluntary activities in the sport sector strengthen social cohesion and inclusion, promote local democracy and citizenship and provide occasions for non-formal education.²⁴ In May 2011, the Council identified volunteering in sport as one of the priority themes for EU-level cooperation in its Resolution on an EU work plan for sport.

The sport sector is able to mobilise more volunteers than any other sector. In most Member States, the sport movement would not exist without volunteering. However, differences among Member States are very large, with some having very low levels of sports

²¹ An EU Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering - A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities, COM(2009) 200 final of 27.04.2009.

²² Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the European Union, 2008/C 319/03 of 13.12.2008.

²³ Youth on the Move – an initiative to unleash the potential of young people to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the European Union, COM (2010) 477 final of 15.09.2010.

²⁴ White Paper on Sport, COM(2007) 391 final of 11.07.2007.

volunteering.²⁵ Member States with a high level of volunteering in sport tend to have a strong volunteering culture and appropriate structures, but also support from public authorities.²⁶

Under the 2010 Preparatory Action in the field of sport, the Commission is funding four pilot projects on volunteering and sport.

2.2.6. Employee volunteering as an expression of corporate social responsibility

As an expression of their Corporate Social Responsibility, both the private and public sector can play an important role in promoting voluntary activities. By investing in employee-volunteering, they not only do "good" in the local community, but at the same time improve their reputation and image, help create a team spirit, improve job satisfaction, and raise productivity while allowing employees or officials to develop new skills.

In 2011 the Commission launched initiatives that seek to promote volunteering amongst its staff. These include intranet web resources for staff with information on volunteering opportunities, good practices and practical guidelines for staff wishing to engage in voluntary activities.²⁷

2.2.7. The EU's relations with third countries and volunteering

2.2.7.1. Promoting the mobility of third country volunteers in the EU

The mutual benefits of volunteering which stem from the migration of third country volunteers to the EU should also be recognised. In this context, Council Directive 2004/114/EC²⁸ creates a reference framework for common minimum conditions of entry and residence of third country volunteers which does not depend on the labour-market situation in the host country. The implementation of these provisions is optional for the Member States.

In 2011, the Commission will publish a report on the application of Council Directive 2004/114/EC and, if appropriate, may consider proposing amendments.

2.2.7.2. Humanitarian aid and volunteering

The area where Europeans consider that volunteers play the most important role is in the field of solidarity and humanitarian aid work, and the European Commission is committed to taking European citizens' opinions seriously: based on Article 214 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Commission is preparing to set up a European

²⁵ "Volunteering in the European Union" (GHK 2010), p. 216.

²⁶ "Volunteering in the European Union" (GHK 2010), pp. 214-215 which is referring also to the income for sports organisations.

²⁷ See <http://myintracomm.ec.europa.eu/serv/en/Volunteering/>. Worthwhile is also mentioning that Commission staff organises and manages charity initiatives like the Schuman Trophy, the "Shoebox for the homeless" campaign, the cancer support group, EU delegation of ATD Quart Monde or the recently created association GIVE EUR-HOPE.

²⁸ Council Directive 2004/114/EC of 13 December 2004 on the conditions of admission of third country nationals for the purposes of studies, pupil exchange, unremunerated training or voluntary service; O.J. L 375 of 23.12.2004, p. 12.

Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps which will serve as a framework for joint contributions from European volunteers to the humanitarian aid operations of the European Union.²⁹

This new body will provide an opportunity for volunteers from different Member States to work together on a common project on EU humanitarian aid as a tangible expression of their solidarity with people in need. It is also expected to help create new opportunities for the participation of European citizens, especially amongst the young. The deployment of European volunteers is also aimed at strengthening local capacities, an area where volunteering can make a real difference. The support of volunteers in disaster preparedness and recovery activities will in particular contribute to laying the foundations for sustainable development processes linked to the EU's pre- and post-crises operations in the area of humanitarian aid.

In 2011, the Commission is funding pilot projects aimed at selecting, training and deploying the first volunteers of the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps. The results of this pilot phase and the outcome of the reviews and consultations and the impact assessment drawing on years of experience of national and international organisations, will allow the Commission to adopt a proposal for a Regulation setting-up the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps in 2012.

2.2.7.3. Development policies and volunteering

Volunteers can play a significant role in development cooperation, either as individual volunteers or in the framework of activities pursued by civil society organisations. In general, voluntary work enhances the effectiveness of the endeavours pursued by these organisations and confirms their non-profit-making nature.

The Commission does not directly support individual volunteers, but does so indirectly by using EU legal and financial instruments to support projects that act in favour of civil society organisations. These groups are increasingly contributing to the design of development policies throughout the developing world, in particular by sharing more responsibility regarding poverty reduction. Although the Commission relies to a considerable extent on civil society organisations in the implementation of overall EU development policy, ultimately it is up to these organisations themselves to decide whether or not to resort to the services of volunteers rather than paid professional staff, either in Europe or across the world.

3. CONCLUSIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

Volunteering is part of our social fabric. It supports fundamental values of inclusion and citizenship. That is why the European Commission is stressing the importance of volunteering during the European Year of Volunteering 2011. The Commission is working with all relevant stakeholders to ensure a meaningful and lasting legacy for the European Year.

The following conclusions will be complemented and further developed during the European Year:

²⁹ How to express EU citizen's solidarity through volunteering: First reflections on a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps, COM(2010) 683 final of 23.11.2010.

- Volunteering is an important creator of human and social capital, a pathway to integration and employment and a key factor for improving social cohesion. It is a highly visible expression of European citizenship, as volunteers contribute to shaping society and helping people in need.
- Its potential can be further developed within the Europe 2020 Strategy for growth. Volunteers are an important resource in our economy and society, but must not be considered as an alternative to a regular workforce.
- By promoting cross-border volunteering in cooperation with Member States and through EU funding programmes, the EU contributes to the mobility and inter-cultural learning of its citizens and reinforces their European identity.

Policy recommendations to Member States

In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the Commission does not intend to promote one single model of volunteering or to harmonise volunteering cultures at local and regional level. However, the Commission recommends that Member States make better use of the potential of volunteering in the following ways:

- In countries lacking a volunteering framework and where there is a weak tradition or culture of volunteering, setting legal frameworks could give incentives to support the development of volunteering.
- Research and data collection on volunteering should be encouraged at the national level. In this context, the use of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work and the United Nations Handbook on Non-Profit organisations is recommended.
- Recognition of the competences and skills gained through volunteering as non-formal learning experiences is essential as a motivating factor for the volunteers and one that creates bridges between volunteering and education.
- Member States should remove remaining obstacles which directly or indirectly impede volunteering in general and in particular cross-border volunteering.
- Member States are invited to open national volunteering schemes for across-borders volunteering to contribute to the development of volunteering in the European Union.

Concrete actions to recognise and promote volunteering at EU level:

The EU is committed to ensuring a long-term follow-up to the 2011 European Year of Volunteering and to continuing the dialogue with the relevant stakeholders in the different policy areas related to volunteering.

- The Commission will propose the creation of a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps in 2012.
- EU funding programmes in different policy areas will further target volunteers and promote cross-border volunteering.
- The Commission will make it easier for EU citizens and stakeholders to get an overview of different funding programmes that can be used by volunteers and for voluntary activities.
- The Commission is willing to further explore possibilities to strengthen the link between volunteering and health/welfare, in particular with regard to the ageing society.
- On the basis of Member States' reports on the implementation of the Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers in 2012, the Commission will make proposals for further development.
- The Commission may introduce proposals that specifically cater for volunteering in the EU's employment strategy, in its fight against poverty and social exclusion and in the context of the Commission's "New Skills for New Jobs" initiative.
- The Commission is preparing a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning including the recognition of competences acquired through volunteering.
- The future 'European Skills Passport' will give individuals the possibility of keeping a record of the skills and competences they acquire through volunteering.
- The Commission will give the forthcoming European Year of Citizens (2013) an appropriate volunteering dimension, promoting notably cross-border volunteering.