

**AVE -Assessing voluntary experience
in a professional perspective**

**Pilot project in the framework of the
programme Leonardo da Vinci**

First interim report for Germany



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Content

1.	National structures involved in volunteering in Germany.....	2
2.	Results of Surveys on Volunteering in Germany	8
	Citizens' Active Participation in Various Areas of Society.....	8
	The Gender Perspective	11
	Youth and Volunteering.....	12
	Volunteering Among Senior Citizens.....	13
	Expectations and Qualification	14
3.	Existing tools and methods to Assess Voluntary Experiences (AVE).....	16
4.	Bibliography	20

1. National structures involved in volunteering in Germany

The welfare concept in Germany favours volunteering in as far as it is primarily oriented around the guiding principle of “subsidiarity”, according to which NGOs in the social sector are allocated state subventions and a special legal status. For all tasks that can be equally well fulfilled by smaller communities or by voluntary associations, NGOs can claim support from public funds.¹ It has always been part of the tradition of charitable organisations in Germany to integrate volunteers at all levels of their activities, but due to the wide-ranging drive towards the professionalisation of social work up to the 1980s, volunteering was pushed more and more to the periphery. In the welfare sector, much more than in sport or politics, volunteers complained of finding too little awareness and recognition of their work.

Above all volunteering formerly took place in the framework of the six welfare associations in Germany:

- Arbeiterwohlfahrt (AWO)
- Caritasverband
- Deutscher Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband (DPWV)
- Deutsches Rotes Kreuz (DRK)
- Diakonisches Werk
- Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland.

However, under the influence of the financial crisis into which the social welfare system has slipped since the reunification of the two German states, the government has stated that “in view of the new challenges ... in future our society will depend more than ever on the voluntary and honorary work of men and women of all generations”.²

¹ This explains why the influence of welfare associations within the system of social protection is stronger in Germany than in other member states of the European Union.

² Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (ed.), Bedeutung ehrenamtlicher Tätigkeit für unsere Gesellschaft, Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Große Anfrage der Fraktionen der CDU/CSU und der F.D.P., Bonn 1996, p. 2

The greater part of social volunteering is done in non-governmental charitable organisations. Social volunteering in most cases is practised without any financial gratification. Since more than one decade volunteer organisations more and more demand at least the payment of an expense allowance or the reimbursement of incurred costs, but due to the decrease of public funding that most voluntary associations receive, still the majority of volunteers have to invest not only their time, but also some money.

The International Year of Volunteers 2001 and the two years of preparation before can be seen as a peak period of political readiness to promote and support volunteering and also of public awareness of the issue.

Up to 2001 and in some cases also in the years after many new institutions and structures were founded that take care of different aspects of volunteerism. The traditional welfare organisations at the same time became more volunteer-oriented again.

As far as public Institutions are concerned, we can observe that most local authorities have created the position of an officer in charge of volunteering. In most cases this is a task to be fulfilled alongside with other tasks by a single person. Only few local authorities have assigned one full job or even more to the support and facilitation of volunteering. Some local authorities run their own volunteer centre (either general or targeted to senior volunteers). Many local authorities fund volunteer centres in their cities that are run by associations.

On the state level, several German states run state campaigns or programmes to promote volunteering or to support voluntary work. In some states there is an office for Volunteering and all states meanwhile defines a formal responsibility for volunteering within the state administration. This can be a department within the social ministry, the ministry of internal affairs (home office) which mostly has the responsibility for sports or it is directly assigned to the department of the prime minister.

For dissemination and communication most state campaigns have a website of their own and we list some examples to allow for an impression of the work done and the issues dealt with here:

state	website
Hessen	www.gemeinsam-aktiv.de/
Saarland	www.pro-ehrenamt.de
Rheinland-Pfalz	www.wir-tun-was.de
Thüringen	www.thueringer-ehrenamtsstiftung.de
Baden-Württemberg	www.buergerengagement.de
Niedersachsen	www.freiwilligenserver.de
Schleswig-Holstein	www.wir.schleswig-holstein.de
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	www.netzwerk-mv.net

Since 1999 there is a division in charge of volunteering in the Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth. There has been no explicit responsibility for volunteering in this or in any other ministry before.

In Germany presently there are about 100 volunteer centres and about the same number of “Seniorenbüros” (offices for active senior citizens, many, but not all of them can be called volunteer centres for seniors). Besides that, there are about 100 Offices for Information and Support of self-help and mutual-aid groups, which are also concerned with volunteering to a high extent. Most of them have at least one person paid staff and usually some volunteers.

All three types of organisations have umbrella organisations as well on state as on national level:

- for the volunteer centres it is
bagfa, Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freiwilligenagenturen,
internet: www.bagfa.de
- for the Seniorenbüros it is
BaS, Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Seniorenbüros,
internet: www.seniorenbueros.org and

- for the self-help-sector it is
NAKOS, Nationale Kontakt- und Informationsstelle zur Anregung und
Unterstützung von Selbsthilfegruppen,
internet: www.nakos.de.

The most important provider of training in the voluntary sector is the “Academy for Volunteering” in Berlin (website: www.ehrenamt.de). Many training providers offer some courses in the field of volunteering, its number and variety has increased a lot in the last couple of years. So already specialized websites can be found providing an overview over training opportunities for volunteering, volunteer organisation and the management of voluntary organisations. For example see a data-base run by the state of Baden-Württemberg: www.fortbildung-ehrenamt.de.

During the last couple of years some bodies on the national level have been founded, which are concerned with Active Citizenship and in this context with volunteering also. Examples are:

Name of organisation:	Website:
Stiftung Mitarbeit	www.mitarbeit.de
Aktive Bürgerschaft e.V.	www.aktive-buergerschaft.de
Aktion Gemeinsinn	www.gemeinsinn.de

To sum up our overview over the national structures involved in volunteering it can be said that from a situation we had up to the 1980, when volunteering was perceived as an almost neglectable and old-fashioned social phenomenon a vast variety of organisations dealing with volunteering has developed, consisting partly of new-founded organisations and partly of older ones with changed their focus and newly concentrated on volunteering and issues of the civic society.

So we are in a quite lucky situation concerning the work in the AVE-project, that most of the organisations mentioned before and many others we did not mention for reasons of space and time already formed a nationwide network for

volunteering and civil citizenship: The Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement BBE (website: www.b-b-e.de).

In 1999, the German Parliament set up the Study Commission “Civic Activities: Towards a Civil Society with a Future“ with the purpose “to take stock of, analyse and evaluate the status quo, and [to] draw up development perspectives and recommendations for action to improve the parameters for civic activities.” (Deutscher Bundestag 2002) The Study Commission presented its report in summer 2002.

In summer 2002, the Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement (BBE) (or Nationwide Network of Civic Activities) was founded. Its office is financially supported by the German Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. It is a three-sector organisation with more than 130 members, in which organisations and associations of the third sector and civil society, economic organisations and national, regional and local authorities and institutions are united to promote civil society and civic activities. Its central concern is to improve the legal, institutional and organisational framework for civic activities.

The practical work of this network is done by eight project groups which develop and initiate concrete projects. These groups work on

- legal and organisational framework conditions,
- development of the local civil society,
- the future of volunteer services,
- the role of civic activities with the reconstruction of the welfare state,
- civic activities of migrants and ethnic minorities,
- education and qualification of civic activities,
- corporate citizenship in enterprises and
- the networking of European civil societies.³

It can easily be seen that at least the three working groups mentioned last have something to do with the AVE project. We expect that Bundesnetzwerk

³ See www.b-b-e.de.

Bürgerschaftliches Engagement is very appropriate to disseminate and discuss (preliminary) results of the AVE project.

But it has to be mentioned that BBE is a relatively new network, it has no public funding beyond the financing of its coordination office and so it is not yet a strong network in terms of practical work.

INBAS-Sozialforschung is member of BBE and will seriously try to contribute to strengthening the network. Nevertheless, for development and test of the tools and facilities to assess voluntary experience we strongly propose to concentrate on the regional and state level (Kreis Offenbach and state of Hessen) because there we find a network which is very much grassroot-based and experienced in practical work and co-operation.

2. Results of Surveys on Volunteering in Germany⁴

Until the late 1990s, a solid data base on volunteering was unavailable in Germany. Therefore the German Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth initiated the so called “Freiwilligensurvey” (i.e. national survey on volunteering) in 1998. Germany knows several different concepts of voluntary activities:

- The traditional “Ehrenamt“ means voluntary activities in formal organisations; self-help, neighbourhood activities, and activities in civic action groups do not fall under this concept.
- “Bürgerschaftliches Engagement” or “civic activities” covers more than the traditional “Ehrenamt“. It means self-help, neighbourhood activities and activities in initiatives of all kinds that relate to community life and areas such as politics, economics, and the social area corresponding to the model of civil society. This is the concept of the Study Commission of the German Parliament.
- “Freiwillige Tätigkeiten” or “volunteering” includes far more activities than the traditional “Ehrenamt“ or „civic activities“, namely all those activities that have no direct economic benefit and are unpaid. These activities may be community-related but need not be. This is the concept of the “Freiwilligensurvey” (Hacket/Mutz 2002).

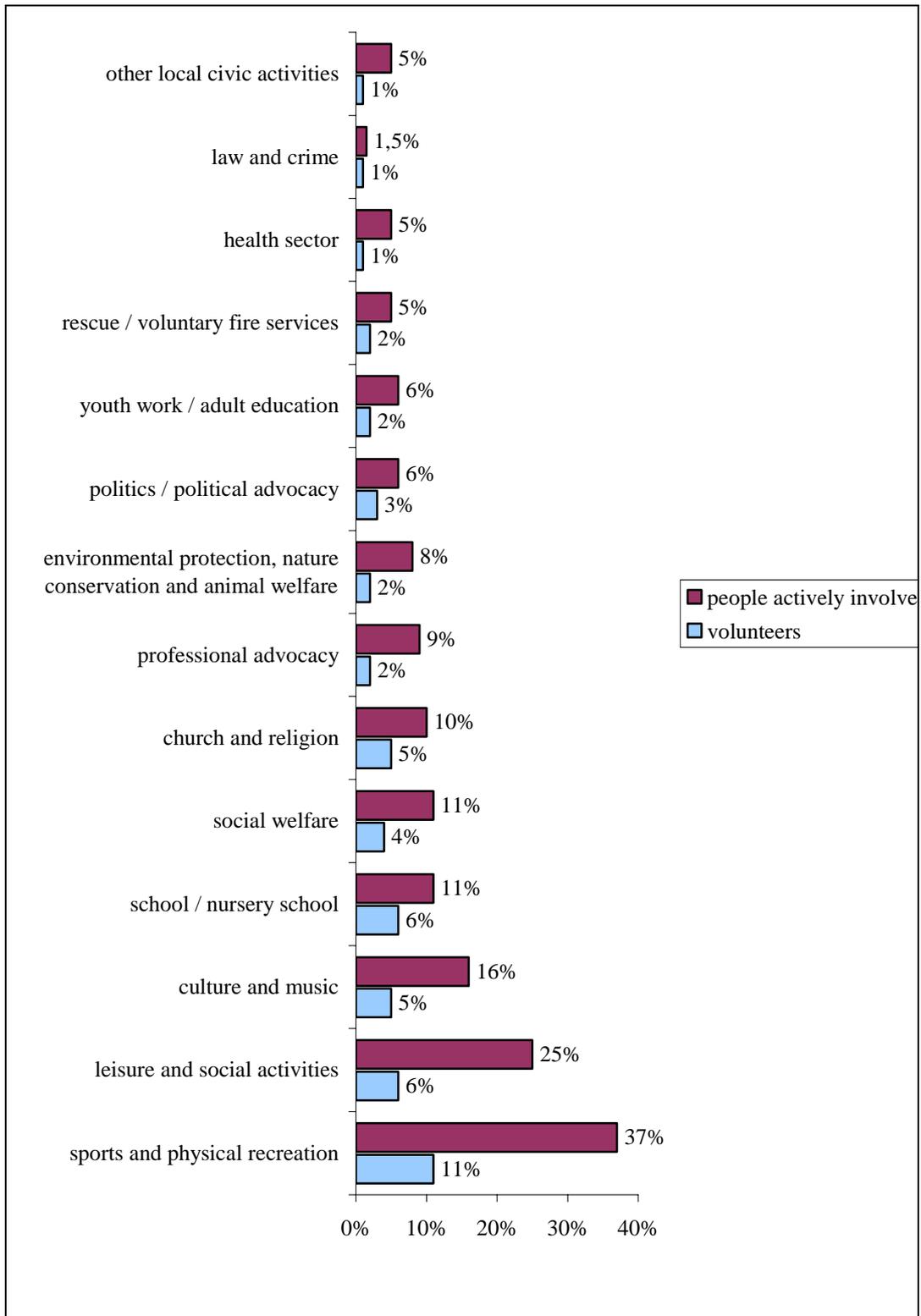
Citizens’ Active Participation in Various Areas of Society

The results of the national survey on volunteering show that 34% of the German population practices one or more activities in the sense of the above concept. This means that approx. 21 mio. Germans are volunteering. Survey respondents were asked if they were actively involved in different areas and if so, whether they performed unpaid activities within this area as well. The highest percentage of participants (37%) and volunteers (11%) was found in the field of sports and physical recreation. In leisure and social activities, a quarter of the German population considers itself active, but only a fifth of them volunteers in this field. In other areas such as schools and nursery schools, rescue and voluntary fire

⁴ This chapter refers to Rosenblatt 2000.

services, law and crime, and church and religion, nearly one half of all active people are volunteers. The lowest percentage of volunteers (1%) is in the areas of health, law and crime, and other civic activities.

Figure 1: „Volunteers“: The sub-group of those actively involved who have also assumed voluntary activities in the respective areas
Basis: resident population 14 years of age and above



Source: Rosenblatt, Bernhard von (2000), S. 45.

This study describes voluntary involvement from the viewpoint of individuals, not that of organisations. In this approach organisational framework conditions can only be recorded to a certain extent and relatively vaguely. The limited information provided by the survey on this subject nonetheless shows the

structural heterogeneity in the area of volunteering. For each activity described the interviewer enquired as to the organisational framework in which it is performed. The most frequent organisational framework in which volunteering takes place is a *club* or *society* (43%). At the other end of the spectrum, with the least significance as regards quantity, are *trade unions* (2%), *self-help groups* (2%) and *private institutions or foundations* (2%). *Self-help groups, initiatives/projects* and *other self-organised groups* present the organisational form of the “self-organised group”.

Most frequently volunteering is concerned with *organising and conducting meetings and events*. This task is stated by almost half of the volunteers; in the *health sector* it is even two out of three volunteers. This is followed by *practical work that needs to be done*. One out of three volunteers states this item as the major task, in some areas even significantly more (*environmental protection, nature conservation and animal welfare*: 58%). In other areas *providing personal care* represents the major task. These areas are the *health sector* where 67% of volunteers state providing personal care to be their major task, the *social welfare* area (55%) and *rescue and fire services* (52%). As providing personal care is only of marginal importance in some of the other areas, on average only one in four volunteers state it as the major task. Just as frequently the major task is *information and PR work* and *lobbying and advocacy*. They represent the major task in *politics and professional advocacy*. *Pedagogical support* or *supervision of a group* is stated by one in four volunteers as the major task, most frequently in the area *youth work outside schools and adult education* (46%). Other important tasks for volunteering are *counseling* (20%) or the *organisation and realisation of aid-projects* (19%). A minority of volunteers also states *fundraising* or *networking* as the major task. This range of possible tasks obviously covers quite well the work undertaken by volunteers.

The Gender Perspective

30% of the female population and 38% of the male population volunteer. This matches the findings of other representative surveys, which likewise show women to have a lower level of participation in the volunteer sector. Furthermore, women and men differ as to their level of participation in different areas of volunteering. Women dominate in schools/nursery schools, social welfare, church and religion and the health sector. Women make up approximately two thirds of volunteers in these sectors. The ratio is balanced in the environmental protection, conservation and animal welfare sector and in law and crime. Men make up the majority in all other areas of involvement. Men represent about 60% of the total in culture and music and in leisure and social activities. Only one in three volunteers are female in sport and physical recreation, youth work outside schools and adult education, and in other local civic activities. Even fewer women (about 25%) are active in professional advocacy outside the workplace. Women are least likely to volunteer in accident, rescue and voluntary fire services and in politics and political advocacy, where only one in five volunteers are female. The findings for volunteering in the accident and rescue services sector, which includes male-dominated voluntary fire services, are as is to be expected. However, the proportion of women in politics and political advocacy is surprisingly low. The gender analysis shows that of the 14 different areas of involvement, sport and physical recreation is the one in which women and men are most likely to volunteer. The remaining areas are ranked differently by women and men and also attract different proportions of the female and male volunteer population.

Youth and Volunteering

Young people aged between 14 and 24 form a particularly active group within society. Firstly, they have a stronger tendency to participate in clubs and societies, groups and projects than in all other age groups. Secondly, at 37%, the number of volunteers in this group is extremely high. This matches the number of volunteers among those of working age, and is higher than the number among those aged 60 and over. The numbers show that young people, of whom 70% attend school or vocational training, seem to be relatively successful in allotting a considerable amount of their time to volunteering. Their volunteering involves regular commitments, and just under half of all young volunteers devote more than 5

hours per week to their voluntary activities. In comparison to older volunteers, the frequency with which young people perform voluntary activities is impressive – 44% do so either on a daily basis or several times per week. In some areas of involvement, the proportion of young volunteers in the total number of volunteers is so large that their contribution is vital. This is especially the case in the areas of sport and accident and rescue services. Volunteering among young people has, up to now, taken place mainly within traditional organization structures and differs little in this regard from other age groups. Half of all young volunteers are active in clubs and societies, and a quarter in large organizations, with the church playing by far the greatest role. Among those young people who perform two voluntary activities, the second is often in a self-organized group, initiative or project, and often associated with school.

Volunteering Among Senior Citizens

45% of senior citizens neither actively participate nor volunteer, 29% are actively involved, 26% volunteer. Senior citizens are thus somewhat less likely to volunteer than their juniors (37% in the 14-49 age group and 38% in the 50-59 age group). Almost as many (31%) of the 60-69 age group are volunteers as the average of all respondents (34%). The level of volunteering does not fall among older senior citizens until upwards of age 75, when the number of volunteers drops below 20%. Comparison with the 50-59 age group – where volunteering is at its strongest – clearly reflects the major change in situation experienced by senior citizens regarding integration into and opportunities for volunteering. Retirement from work, the end of family-raising, loss of a spouse, etc., lead to problems of structuring time, loss of competency, and special challenges in finding meaningful activities and taking on positions of responsibility in old age. While senior citizens are involved in all areas of society, there are five areas of involvement in which they are most active. These are sports and physical recreation, church and religion, social welfare, leisure and social activities, and culture and music. Senior citizens are less frequently involved in the remaining areas. Their involvement in the various areas varies according to age and gender, employment status, occupational or income status, region and the form of organization in which they volunteer. Social integration into family and

community life facilitates volunteering. Higher levels of educational and career achievement – factors that are usually linked with greater material security – positively influence volunteering among senior citizens. The rate of involvement among senior citizens is higher for men (30%) than for women (21%). In 4 out of the 14 areas of involvement (social welfare, church and religion, school and nursery school, and law and crime), however, women are more frequently involved than men.

Expectations and Qualification

Leading on from the results obtained in previous surveys, in this study the possible spectrum of such expectations was formulated in ten points. For each point the respondents were first asked how *important* it is in relation to the activity exercised by them and, secondly, to what extent the expectations linked to the activity were actually *fulfilled*. The most important expectation proved to be that the activity should be fun and that the volunteer comes into contact with friendly people. However, this is in keeping with altruistic motives: doing something for public welfare and helping other people. Points such as “expanding one’s own knowledge and experience”, “having one’s own responsibilities and decision-making powers” and “also finding recognition for the activity” are also aspects, which are considered by the majority to be *important*. Matters such as “representing one’s own justified interests”, “take charge of one’s own problems” and finally that “the activity is also of benefit for one’s own occupational life” are considered by the majority to be *not so important*.

Questions of the demand profile of volunteers were supplemented by additional questions with regard to the demand category "specialist knowledge". The first question related to the prerequisites, which have to be met before one can take up volunteering in the specific activity: 32% stated “particular specialist knowledge in the field of activity”, 19% stated that they needed “special prior training in order to prepare for the activity”. One in two volunteers state with regard to the activity performed that there are “courses and seminars for further education purposes on offer for those active in the respective area” (46%). To the extent that such offers do exist and are known to the volunteers, most of them have

participated in such measures (70%), in most cases even in more than one. This means that a total of one in three volunteers has participated in one form or another of further training with regard to the activity performed. There are, however, considerable differences with regard to the scope of specialist knowledge required and the offer of further training and education between the individual areas of involvement.

3. Existing tools and methods to Assess Voluntary Experiences (AVE)

The AVE-project contributes to Priority 1 “Valuing Learning” of the 2003 Call for Proposals of the Second phase of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme. The core issues in this priority are twofold:

- identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning
- transfer and mutual recognition of formal certificates and diplomas.

The AVE-project is focussed on the first core issue, which means it will assess the qualifications acquired in the voluntary sector and its relevance on the labour market.

Existing tools and methods in this context are:

- all existing forms of documentation and assessment of voluntary work no matter whether this is originally meant to be applied for a professional or labour market purpose
- all instruments and tools designed to assess the results of informal learning no matter whether these were originally meant to be applied in the voluntary sector or elsewhere.

The instruments developed in the AVE-project will have to be accepted by employers and vocational training institutions, but they must practically work in the voluntary sector. For that reason it seems clear to us that existing tools and methods within the voluntary sector - which obviously respond to some kind of demand there - should play a much greater role in the AVE project than tools developed in other contexts, but could be applied to the voluntary sector.

In Germany, like in most (or maybe all) other European countries, certificates and diplomas highly are related to formal learning processes. The right to access to a specific kind of job depends on having successfully passed certain schools, courses or seminars, while it is still very unusual to gain access to certain kinds of careers by successfully passing an examination no matter where the candidate has got her or his knowledge from.

The conclusions to draw from this for the AVE-project are:

- Certificates within the voluntary sector referring to qualifications (and not only to the fact that a volunteer did a certain job for a certain period of time) are usually based on training measures and not on informal learning
- We have to be aware that from the point of view of the employers the AVE-project is innovative in a double sense: it is new to take the voluntary sector into account and it is new to take the result of informal learning into account.

In Germany, the issue of documentation of work done in the voluntary sector has been on the agenda for more than one decade and has been raised by voluntary services and initiatives in churches and welfare organisations. But the perspective was - and still is - a societal and not an individual one: a group of volunteers and volunteer organizers intended to show to the public and to policy makers, how big the contribution of the voluntary sector to societal wealth was. Therefore “Nachweishefte für das Ehrenamt” (proof-sheets for voluntary work) were developed mainly aiming at allowing to count the total number of hours spent on voluntary work within one organisation or in society in general. These approaches were not very successful, because the majority of volunteers did not really like the bureaucratic aspect of being asked to write a proof-sheet.

It was also claimed that the fact that people are or were volunteering should be taken into account and valued when applying for a job. But this was meant to take place without reference to specific experiences or skills gained through volunteering, but the perspective was more that employers should prefer people who volunteer as employees because volunteers somehow are the better people, those who take responsibility for the community, who look at the whole instead of being only lead by their individual needs or interests.

In formal statements asked from them, employers usually react positive, somehow saying that they are willing to value voluntary experience. But up to now there is no proof that employers really prefer volunteers compared to non-volunteers. It also makes sense to assume that employers want employees who fully concentrate on their professional work and are flexible to the demands of this work.

People who are volunteering may tend to ask for extra time off to participate in meetings related to their voluntary work or even spend working time to deal with voluntary issues.

So in the German context there is a high demand to somehow find out, if and under what conditions and premises employers are really willing to honour the fact that someone who applies for a job is volunteering and then in a second step are really ready to take a closer look on the specific skills and competencies gained through voluntary experience.

We have an ongoing project in the state of Hessen, in which several voluntary organisations participate. The organisation in charge is Hessischer Jugendring (the state umbrella organisation of youth associations). This project promotes to introduce “Qualifikationsnachweise im Ehrenamt” (qualification proof sheets in volunteering) which go beyond the proof sheets we mentioned before and include a list of areas of qualification with the following items⁵:

- Open-mindedness and readiness for new contacts
- Organisational talents
- Leadership competencies
- Ability to fit into a working team and co-operate
- Ability to communicate
- Ability to criticise in a constructive way
- Ability to go through conflicts in a constructive way
- Creativity and readiness for innovation
- Readiness to take responsibility
- Reliability
- Self reliance and taking initiative
- Public relation and representation skills
- Craft skills
- Computer skills
- Being ready to help
- Being loyal

⁵ See Hessischer Jugendring 2000 p. 22

- Being personally well-balanced
- Being able to work factual and issue centered
- Being trustworthy and confident

The list is meant to be extended and differentiated in the course of the project and we plan to contact the initiators of the project and discuss possible modes of co-operation.

The other area of examples of tools and methods possibly valuable for the project are those which were developed for the assessment process of competencies of unemployed young people. A compendium of descriptions of such tools was compiled by our mother organisation, INBAS GmbH in Offenbach.⁶

The crucial difference to the tools and methods developed in the voluntary sector and described above is that applicants for the competencies assessment procedure go through some kind of examination or test. To apply a procedure like this to assess voluntary experience would be very unusual in the German context.

After having examined the tools described by INBAS we decided to treat them more or less as background material and as a possible source of additional ideas, but not as a set of instruments that could be more or less directly applied to the voluntary sector.

⁶ see Voigt, Birgit and Kersten, Ralph (INBAS GmbH) 2002 and 2003

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AVE

Assessing voluntary experience

Pilot project in the framework of the programme Leonardo da Vinci

First interim report for Kreis Offenbach / Germany

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Content

1. Focussing research and co-operation of AVE in Germany.....	1
2. Background: The social structure of Kreis Offenbach.....	1
3. Foundation of mother's initiatives and mother's centres in the 1980ies.....	3
4. Mother's centres in Kreis Offenbach today	4
5. The mother's centre in the city of Langen: Example for the range of activities of mother's centres in Germany	5
6. Conclusion and Outlook	6

1. Focussing research and co-operation of AVE in Germany

According to the project outline all volunteers are eligible for the project, who are heading for a professional career and want to make use of their voluntary experience to promote this professional career. We can expect that it is possible to find this kind of volunteers in almost any voluntary organisation, but we can primarily identify two groups of volunteers, for which a professional use of voluntary experience is an important issue

- young people during their education, on the threshold between vocational training and employment and in the early phase of their employment
- women during the childcare phase who intend to re-enter the labour market and see their voluntary work as an opportunity to keep their professional competences up to date

In order to contribute to the development and to the practical examination of an assessment tool for voluntary experiences, we need not only associations, who employ this kind of volunteers, but who also have the issue of making professional use of their voluntary activity high on the agenda.

From this perspective youth associations and associations of women and especially mothers are a good starting point for building up a co-operation network for the AVE-project. DPWV Kreis Offenbach of course is primarily interested to develop and employ tools with its own member organisations. Young volunteers mainly work in youth organisations and those are not organized in DPWV. Women's and mother's initiatives and centres on the other hand are members and already parts of an existing regional network. This is the reason why we choose voluntary work in women's and mother's initiatives and centres as the starting point for the AVE-work.

2. Background: The social structure of Kreis Offenbach

To understand voluntary work in women's and mother's initiatives and centres it is necessary to go a few steps back in history and refer to the framework-conditions in regions like Kreis Offenbach.

Kreis Offenbach (County of Offenbach) consists of 13 municipalities with altogether 340.000 inhabitants. It is part of the Rhein-Main agglomeration and is located south-east of the city of Francfort. The closer to Francfort the clearer the suburban structure is. Up to 2003 the greater part of Kreis Offenbach was not very well connected to the cities of Francfort and Offenbach by public transport. For this reason, housing costs remained relatively moderate and Kreis Offenbach was an attractive location for young families, because they could afford a house. New housing areas were built in all municipalities and the number of inhabitants of Kreis Offenbach nearly doubled within the last 30 years. The old municipal structure consisted of villages and small towns, which had been integrated together with the new housing areas into small cities with up to 45.000 inhabitants.

The gap between old and new inhabitants is still very clear and social life and local associations are still focussed around the old municipal structures. Access to these old social networks was not easy for people who moved into Kreis Offenbach from all areas of Germany because the family fathers found good jobs in the Rhein-Main area.

The housewives and mothers neither had an easy access to the traditional associations and networks nor could use the support of extended family networks because these were usually located elsewhere in Germany.

Public childcare facilities in the kindergarten were designed to allow housewives to do their shopping and housework before noon, but opening hours usually did not make part time employment of mothers possible, especially because many mothers were well educated and adequate jobs were only available in the urban centres.

Often new housing areas were not equipped with the adequate number of places in childcare facilities. The conservative point of view was that mothers should stay t home and look after their children themselves. When mothers demanded an extension of the opening hours of childcare facilities, it could happen to them that they got the answer “No, because we do not want to spend public money to allow mothers to play an additional hour of tennis”.

3. Foundation of mother's initiatives and mother's centres in the 1980ies

There were no public childcare facilities available for children under three years of age. If mothers wanted to have those facilities, they had to organize them on a private basis. From this situation new forms of voluntary work and new forms of voluntary organisations began to develop. Small private groups founded to allow for joint childcare developed to mother's initiatives. These dealt with political issues such as continuously claiming for extended childcare facilities and went beyond solely talking about children and family when they met. Groups reading books together and discussing the content were founded and various courses and activities were offered. All this was achieved by voluntary work.

The work and the rising attractive power of these initiatives led to the foundation of women's and mother's centres, of which today five exist in Kreis Offenbach, while at the same time there are some smaller initiative working in similar issues and in a similar perspective.

“The mother's centre is a self-organized institution run by mothers for mothers. It is a point of contact as well as a service facility, but it is also a think-tank and a platform to interfere in society and political decision making in favour of mothers”.

Traditionally, voluntary work done by women took place in the social field, for example in churches or in charities. It used to remain almost invisible, following the rule “Do good, but do not talk about it”. There was no culture of honouring voluntary work in a public ceremony that could be compared to more male dominated areas of volunteering such as the fire-brigades or sports clubs. In traditional contexts of female volunteering it was almost a taboo to talk about the needs of the volunteers themselves.

Mother's centres began to develop a counterbalance to the attitude mentioned above. In mothers's centres it was legitimate to talk about one's own needs, wishes, experiences and perspectives. Here it became possible to do something outside one's own house without employing a nanny or a baby-sitter, because all activities in mother's centres are accompanied by childcare.

Volunteering in mother's centres was an opportunity to make use of one's talents and skills and to be creative, no matter whether the qualifications used were acquired through vocational training or through learning by doing when caring for one's family and keeping the house.

In the beginning there were no material or financial gratifications available for volunteering in mother's centres, but alongside the process of institutionalization of the women's movement in Germany public funds were allocated to mother's centres which allowed them to pay a lump sum of something like 5 or 6 EUROS per hour.

To be paid for the work done, even if the amount paid is low, is an important issue in the women's movement and part of the concept of mother's centres. Re-integration into the labour market and keeping one's qualifications up to date during the phase of childcare were and still are key issues in mother's centres.

4. Mother's centres in Kreis Offenbach today

Today mother's centres offer a variety of services and opportunities to support families. The core institution of a mother's centre still is the "coffee table", an opportunity for mothers to meet, to talk to each other and to develop ideas and perspectives.

"Mother's centres showed that the readiness of young women to volunteer is much higher than expected. The motto of women's centres saying "For each woman there is something she can do especially well" proved to be true. Mother's centres offer the opportunity to use and to develop their skills and qualifications.

In 1998, the mother's centres in Germany were awarded by the United Nation Quality Seal for best practice, because they:

“contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of families and promote volunteering and civic commitment of women as well as their participation in local policy making”.

From 1989 onward the Hessian mother's centres were funded by the state government and there was also an umbrella and central service organisation Hessisches Mütterbüro (Hessian Mother's Office), a professional organisation depending on public funds. Due to the financial crisis of public authorities, but in the state of Hessen probably also due to a re-orientation of social policies in a more conservative and traditional direction, the funding for Hessisches Mütterbüro was stopped in 2003, so that the organisation had to close down and the funding for mothers's centres was sharply cut down.

5. The mother's centre in the city of Langen: Example for the range of activities of mother's centres in Germany

For two hours every workday morning and one afternoon the mother's centre offers an open meeting opportunity accompanied by childcare a facility.

Through various courses and seminars mothers have the opportunity to improve their skills and knowledge, but also to disseminate the skills and knowledge they have to other mothers.

The "Mini-Kindergarten" is a childcare facility for children between two and three years of age, this is the year of age before regular childcare facilities are available in Germany. Here a paid nanny and a volunteering mother or father work together.

Ferienspiele (Holiday games) are open to all children of elementary schools in the City of Langen during easter, summer, and autumn school holidays. It has to be mentioned that part of the regular public childcare facilities close in the period of school holiday.

The second-hand shop offers the opportunity to buy children's clothing and all other kinds of child-related articles at a low price and also allows parents to get some money back selling children's articles they don't use any more.

Mother's library contains books from all areas of interest of women and can be used by all visitors of the mother's centres at no cost.

Lunch table: For up to 15 mothers and their children the mother's centre offers the opportunity to have lunch together, which is another important element in the range of relieving measures for families.

1991 an all day schooling facility opened in Langen. It has to be commented, that all day school facilities are still very unusual in Germany. The mother's centre runs the school kitchen in this facility and thereby created two workplaces from women from the centre.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

To sum up it can be said that mother's centres are a very good starting point for the AVE work in Germany, because:

- they provide a wide range of experience in different fields and related to different skills to the women who are volunteering there and
- the issue of re-entering the labour market has a high priority.

In the next phase of the project, we plan to get in touch with mother's centres in Kreis Offenbach negotiate the possible role of them in the AVE network.