

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'The contribution of volunteering to Economic and Social Cohesion'

(2008/C 105/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- emphasises the considerable economic contribution that voluntary activity makes to local, regional, national and the EU economies through (a) the extra human resources that it adds to social and economic activity and (b) the creation of social capital and a better 'quality of life' which can be an influential factor in investment and job creation.
- emphasises that volunteering should not be seen as a substitute or replacement for employed staff in any environment;
- encourages the Member States to collect accurate statistical information on volunteer involvement at a local and regional level also, to support the development of appropriate initiatives at both levels;
- considers that issues regarding the lack of a legal status for volunteering should be given greater consideration, with particular attention on rights and responsibilities and recommends that where relevant, volunteering should be granted a clearly defined and compatible legal status across all EU Member States with regard to cross-border travel for volunteering purposes;
- considers that there is an important EU dimension to volunteering and would therefore like to see a more coherent and comprehensive policy approach, in particular:
 - Better understanding through more research and better quality statistics at the EU level
 - Recognition of the economic contribution of volunteering and a wider acceptance of its monetary equivalent as match funding in EU funded programmes
 - A broader focus on volunteering at EU level beyond the citizenship and youth affairs arenas
 - An examination of new initiatives to encourage exchange of experience and mobility of volunteers through a European Voluntary programme for all ages;

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Policy recommendations

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General remarks

1. regards volunteering for the purposes of this opinion to have three defining characteristics i.e. not being undertaken for financial reward, being undertaken of their own free will, and to be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer or their family. These characteristics cover a wide spectrum of volunteering activities from the formal to informal, short-term to long-term, and part-time to full-time e.g. Voluntary Service;

2. recognises that volunteering is a key element of active citizenship and democracy at all levels, in that those engaged in volunteering are directly or indirectly working to improve society for all at a local, regional and national level;

3. Recognises that socially excluded sections of society are least likely to volunteer and that supporting these groups to volunteer and feel needed as volunteers is an important goal;

4. recognises the role that volunteering plays in developing nations globally, and the considerable role that volunteering plays through this in reducing global poverty and promoting a global dialogue;

5. recognises the role that volunteering can play at local, regional, national and global level in addressing climate change issues, and also in delivering civil protection, social inclusion, development cooperation, better integration of disabled persons and immigrants;

Contributing to the Lisbon Agenda — the importance of volunteering

6. emphasises the considerable economic contribution that voluntary activity makes to local, regional, national and the EU economies through (a) the extra human resources that it adds to social and economic activity ⁽¹⁾ and (b) the creation of social capital and a better 'quality of life' which can be an influential factor in investment and job creation. Research shows that social capital has a direct positive relationship to levels of growth in European regions ⁽²⁾. Fully accepts that Social Capital can also be seen as 'mutually reinforcing and producing

⁽¹⁾ The large voluntary component of the 08 Welcome Programme for Liverpool's year as European Capital, for example.

⁽²⁾ Social Capital and Regional Economic Growth (Beugelsdijk and van Schaik, 2003).

beneficial effects on economic growth, as well as in other crucial areas such as social control, inclusion, health, governance, institutions, democratic empowerment' ⁽³⁾;

7. highlights the benefits of volunteering with regards to the employability of a person ⁽⁴⁾ through participation in a volunteering and voluntary service scheme. The CoR further considers that the most vulnerable groups of society (immigrants, minorities, unemployed, homeless, substance abusers, school drop-outs) are empowered to transform their lives, get actively involved in society, through acquired skills and competences, get access to better paid jobs or find a path back to education. Through this opportunity, people from all backgrounds contribute together for the common good, and achieve social cohesion, diversity and respect;

8. highlights the 'added value' that volunteering can bring to social support activities e.g. befriending projects for people with disabilities that cannot necessarily be provided by paid support;

9. underlines the role of volunteering in providing new and innovative responses to emerging social issues and acting as a testbed in delivering new services and job opportunities;

10. emphasises however that volunteering should not be seen as a substitute or replacement for employed staff in any environment;

11. highlights the positive effects of volunteering on the health of a person, and the potential reduction of costs volunteering can be to the health expenditure of local, regional and national health services. Research has shown that volunteering can have a particularly positive effect on the health of older people ⁽⁵⁾. This health benefit can impact on all ages from youth to retirement, and can play a preventative role in relation to physical and mental illness;

12. notes the critical role that volunteering can play in relation to life long learning, in allowing individuals to develop new skills that contribute to their personal, social and cultural development, and increase and adapt their employability in an ever changing economic environment. In particular, it is strongly supportive of student volunteering activity in schools, in order to instil the values that it embodies;

⁽³⁾ The Well-being of Nations; the Role of Human and Social Capital (OECD 2001).

⁽⁴⁾ Time Bank/Reed Executive Survey of 200 of the UK's top businesses (2000) (http://timebank.org.uk/mediacentre/press_release_details.php?id=76).

⁽⁵⁾ The Health Benefits of Volunteering — A Review of Recent Research (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007).

13. underlines the role of volunteering in underpinning local development initiatives and in facilitating the successful implementation of a number of EU-funded initiatives, such as the Leader Programme. This activity acts as a counter-balance to the negative effects of globalisation and in ensuring sustainable local economic development;

14. encourages greater collaboration between public authorities and voluntary organisations in the development of relevant public policy, to help ensure that such policy better meets the needs of the voluntary sector;

Lack of research and statistical data on volunteering

15. highlights the need to immediately address the lack of complete and accurate EU wide or national statistics on the economic contribution of volunteering. The Committee of the Regions therefore welcomes the Belgian, French, Czech Republic, Italian and Slovakian commitment to implement the UN Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts;

16. encourages the Member States to collect accurate statistical information on volunteer involvement at a local and regional level also, to support the development of appropriate initiatives at both levels;

17. calls on the European Commission to develop more systematic data collection on volunteers and the services they provide and supports the inclusion of volunteering as a specific category in the Statistical Accounts of Eurostat to accurately assess the economic value of volunteering;

18. recommends that comparative research on volunteering be carried out across the EU to obtain data on its development trends, scope and characteristics at national, regional and local levels. This would enable a clear indication of cultural similarities and differences in relation to volunteer activity and infrastructure;

19. recommends that research be carried out EU-wide to identify best practice experiences in promoting and supporting volunteerism on a local and regional basis. Depending on research findings, areas with more historical experience of volunteering could support other regions and localities to develop new initiatives;

Legal status of volunteering

20. considers that issues regarding the lack of a legal status for volunteering should be given greater consideration, with particular attention on rights and responsibilities and recommends that where relevant, volunteering should be granted a clearly defined and compatible legal status across all EU Member States with regard to cross-border travel for volunteering purposes;

21. emphasises that, as a general rule, obstacles to volunteering such as lack of insurance, or removal of state entitlements such as social security should not occur, and that appropriate legal frameworks should be adopted to ensure this;

Supporting volunteer support infrastructure

22. recommends that local and regional authorities support efforts to develop an infrastructure to support and facilitate volunteering, whilst respecting the autonomy of the voluntary sector. For example, the existence of locally based Volunteer Centres or other appropriate infrastructure can aid in promoting voluntary work, providing information on volunteering opportunities and 'professionalising' volunteer management practices amongst volunteer involving organisations;

23. draws attention to the fact that, with a view to recognising volunteering, decentralised certificates of competence relating to skills, knowledge and experience acquired through volunteering already exist ⁽⁶⁾ and notes the potential for linking these existing systems to the Europass CV scheme, to encourage EU-wide recognition of relevant volunteering experiences with regard to employability;

24. also notes the potential of an EU Awards system for voluntary and business sector organisations to highlight examples of best practice and excellence in relation to the promotion and encouragement of volunteering. This could be held on an annual basis to encourage an EU wide discourse on issues such as volunteer management and support;

25. highlights that with regard to volunteer work with children and vulnerable adults, the lack of a co-ordinated EU-wide police clearance process by the Member States means that migrants are unable to comply with requirements established by Member States and volunteer involving organisations to protect children and vulnerable adults from potential abuse;

Support for organisations reliant on volunteering activity

26. welcomes efforts by some Directorates-General (DG EAC in particular) to adopt a more understanding approach to use voluntary activity as a means of match-funding on EU-funded projects and emphasises that voluntary activity should be better recognised as equivalent to co-financing in other EU funding programmes, once this activity can be suitably costed. This would go some way towards directly recognising the value for voluntary organisations in involving volunteers;

⁽⁶⁾ An example of such schemes is that introduced by the German federal State of Hessen
<http://www.kompetenznachweis.de/>.

27. recognises the importance of promoting and supporting Volunteer Management Best Practices amongst volunteer involving organisations. Research shows that the implementation of such best practice can lead to increased levels of volunteering within an organisation and better retention of existing volunteers ⁽⁷⁾;

28. encourages volunteer involving organisations to utilise the skills and energies of volunteers in a strategic, policy-based and planned manner to help boost organisational efficiency and to create memorable volunteering experiences;

The role of volunteering in social cohesion

29. notes the key role that voluntary activity can play in an individual's personal development. It provides a new perspective on society and can also increase a person's self-esteem and confidence, enabling them to play a fuller role in wider society; points out that the efforts of voluntary workers are also of considerable importance for economic, cultural and social development at local and regional level;

30. recognises the importance that volunteering can play in the integration of new and historically excluded communities at a local, regional and national level. Volunteering enables individuals and groups to meet other people from other walks of life in a positive and mutually supporting environment;

31. cautions against the European Union over concentrating its support for volunteering activity on youth and young people and underlines that volunteering is an activity in which all sections of society can play a full and rewarding role;

32. therefore, encourages the EU, given the aging EU population, to specifically encourage older people to engage in volunteering, given the (a) life learned skills and experiences of older people and (b) the proven health benefits of volunteering. An excellent example of this is the Active Retirement Associations in Ireland;

33. recognises that volunteering has a vital role to play in breaking down social isolation among individuals and groups through (a) the provision of social supports to vulnerable children and adults and (b) the fact that the volunteer him/herself can develop new networks and reduce their own isolation;

⁽⁷⁾ Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers (Mark A. Hager, Jeffrey L. Brudney, June 2004, The Urban Institute).

34. notes the role that volunteering and specific projects can play in promoting and encouraging intergenerational dialogue and understanding in today's rapidly changing society ⁽⁸⁾;

35. calls for the establishment of a funding initiative within the Town Twinning programme to allow for volunteer exchange projects to enhance local and regional EU networks and active citizenship;

Involving public and private employers

36. emphasises that volunteering is a key element in the promotion a healthy work-life balance for employees across the EU, in encouraging activities and networking outside the working environment;

37. recommends the promotion of volunteering by public service agencies at the local and regional levels, through the encouragement of local volunteering by their staff, or by the development of volunteering initiatives and partnerships ⁽⁹⁾;

38. supports the development of sustainable linkages between businesses and local voluntary organisations to promote Corporate Social Responsibility that is human resource based in addition to generating financial support from businesses. This could be done in conjunction with locally-established SMEs as well as with regional and local business representative organisations in getting management to promote volunteer activity within workforces;

Developing an EU dimension

39. considers that there is an important EU dimension to volunteering and would therefore like to see a more coherent and comprehensive policy approach, in particular:

- Better understanding through more research and better quality statistics at the EU level
- Recognition of the economic contribution of volunteering and a wider acceptance of its monetary equivalent as match funding in EU funded programmes

⁽⁸⁾ For example the Living Scenes project in Galway sees 24 Transition Year Students from the Presentation Secondary School teaming up with 22 adults from the Galway Active Retirement Associations in a cross-generational programme that is now integrated into the school's Transition Year curriculum.

⁽⁹⁾ Many local and regional authorities in some Member States have developed or support volunteering programmes with their staff, often through voluntary contributions from staff salaries to help transfer skills to charitable organisations, support young indigenous entrepreneurs and local development activities.

- A broader focus on volunteering at EU level beyond the citizenship and youth affairs arenas
 - An examination of new initiatives to encourage exchange of experience and mobility of volunteers through a European Voluntary programme for all ages;
40. recommends that the Commission launch practical programmes or actions paving the way for transnational European projects that involve the entire population of the Union, and not only young people;
41. recommends that 2012 be declared European Year of Active Citizenship through Volunteering, to provide a focus for the promotion of volunteering and the implementation of initiatives to address issues as raised in this Opinion;

42. recognises that due to the horizontal nature of volunteering in the framework of EU policies and its importance in relation to EU activities in various sectors, that there is a need for greater co-ordination of existing policies and activities to successfully engage with the issues raised in this Opinion;

43. encourages the European Parliament to be more proactive in dealing with the horizontal nature of volunteering. Furthermore, a single entry point within the European Commission may help to develop the potential that volunteering has in various policy areas, beyond the citizenship and youth affairs arena;

44. pledges its support to furthering the recommendations set out in this Opinion in partnership with the European Parliament and the European Commission, where relevant.

Brussels, 7 February 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE
