

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Mobility of Young Volunteers across Europe'

(2009/C 76/05)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- notes that there are at present considerable differences between Member States regarding the way in which volunteering is organised and that there is a lack of statistical data and thorough research into volunteering.
- calls upon the European Commission to support the promotion of cooperation between voluntary organisations by developing not only a European Youth Volunteer Portal, but also a database of best practices, projects, opportunities and detailed information. The European Commission should make use of and refer to national, regional and local information, so that the information is made more easily available to young people.
- wholeheartedly supports the initiative of the European Parliament and others to declare 2011 the European Year of Volunteering, and is ready to participate actively in its implementation. Throughout this year particular attention should be paid to young people and inclusion.
- calls upon the Commission, the Member States and the local and regional authorities to strongly support volunteering within the education system, so that young people come into contact with voluntary activities at an early stage and come to see it as a normal contribution to community life. Such voluntary activities could become part of the curriculum.
- believes that volunteering constitutes a particularly valuable possibility of mobility for young people. In view of this, disadvantaged young people who would like to volunteer and who would otherwise benefit less, or not at all, from opportunities for mobility, require various forms of support. Support to the training and mobility of socio-educational instructors specialised in youth and youth leaders will be very useful in this context. Moreover, the opportunities which local and regional authorities have to reach this target group more effectively should be utilised.

Rapporteur: Rinda DEN BESTEN (NL/PES), Executive Member of Utrecht Council

Reference document

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across Europe
COM(2008) 424 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. notes that there are at present considerable differences between Member States regarding the way in which volunteering is organised and that there is a lack of statistical data and thorough research into volunteering. Because harmonisation of laws and regulations is neither possible nor desirable, the Committee of the Regions proposes that a phased approach be adopted. The first phase would consist of a detailed study of the different systems and laws and regulations which exist in the various Member States with regard to volunteering, the wishes of (potential) young volunteers and the obstacles which they encounter when they want to volunteer abroad, and the benefit of volunteering for the young volunteer as well as the region of origin and host region. This information could contribute to the discussion and generate a new policy which fits in well with the reality of youth volunteering in Europe.

2. welcomes the initiative of the European Commission to promote the mobility of young volunteers across Europe.

3. appreciates the European Commission's creativity in its search for a way to facilitate youth volunteering in another EU country, but is afraid that making national schemes for voluntary activities interoperable is not the solution because of the different ways of organising volunteering in the various European countries. For these reasons we advocate the promotion of cooperation between voluntary organisations (be they social organisations or authorities) in different EU countries and we encourage Member States to promote cross-border voluntary projects.

4. calls upon the European Commission to support the promotion of cooperation between voluntary organisations by developing not only a European Youth Volunteer Portal, but also a database of best practices, projects, opportunities and detailed information. The European Commission should make use of and refer to national, regional and local information, so that the information is made more easily available to young people.

5. emphasises the role of local and regional authorities with regard to volunteering and in particular the involvement of young people with fewer opportunities. Volunteering can open up a way to inclusion for youth with fewer opportunities, and since in many Member States the local and regional authorities

are directly responsible for youth policy and possess a great deal of knowledge and experience on the subject, this is the level where innovative and creative solutions are usually found and where important partnerships are entered into. In addition, local and regional authorities play an important role in encouraging young people since they are close to the organisations which receive volunteers and can motivate them to exchange young volunteers.

6. calls upon the Member States to allocate adequate funds to local and regional authorities for the implementation of common objectives for voluntary activities by young people and encourages Member States to make use of EU funds and programmes (such as the European Social Fund and the Youth in Action Programme) to enhance the quality of international voluntary projects by offering support and guidance to national, regional and local voluntary organisations. This support is intended to help organisations to build up international contacts, develop specific competences which are necessary in order to support young people from other countries and to set up international projects.

7. recommends that the local and regional authorities should strongly support the development of an infrastructure to support volunteering, whilst at the same time, of course, leaving the autonomy of volunteering intact. For example, the establishment of local and regional volunteer centres can help to promote volunteering, supply information, motivate young people to do cross-border volunteering and assess the quality and effectiveness of volunteering.

8. deplores the fact that there are still socio-economic and administrative obstacles which hinder the mobility of young volunteers. It therefore proposes to take the lead by drawing up a list of these obstacles in the context of a broad review of volunteering (as described in point 1 of this opinion). Because of the lack of data on volunteering, the Committee of the Regions also requests the Member States to submit the findings of the broad review by 2011, so that volunteering policy can be adjusted.

9. wholeheartedly supports the initiative of the European Parliament and others to declare 2011 the European Year of Volunteering, and is ready to participate actively in its implementation. Throughout this year particular attention should be paid to young people and inclusion.

10. would stress the importance of reducing linguistic barriers in Europe by encouraging language learning by volunteers.

11. points out that volunteering needs a broader definition than the one used in the proposal. Volunteering can be done on either a full-time or a part-time basis, for a short or long term, unpaid or with pocket money and/or coverage of expenses, with or without a contribution from the volunteer depending on the target group and circumstances.

12. emphasises the importance of recognising skills acquired, so that they may be used later in the volunteer's career (work or study). Volunteering is after all an important form of informal learning and contributes to the development and accessibility of youth education. For these reasons schools, as well as social organisations and the business community should be able to play a (greater) role in recognising skills acquired through volunteering and in implementing the existing instruments for this purpose, Europass and Youthpass.

13. calls upon the Commission, the Member States and the local and regional authorities to strongly support volunteering within the education system, so that young people come into contact with voluntary activities at an early stage and come to see it as a normal contribution to community life. Such voluntary activities could become part of the curriculum.

14. considers it extremely important to ensure a proper balance regarding the added value that volunteering can bring for young people and for society (in all its aspects). The interests and the development of young people always come first and the interests of society follow on from that through the more active commitment and involvement of young people in society.

15. expresses its appreciation for the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and hopes to see it further developed in the future so that as many young people as possible have the opportunity to engage in volunteering abroad.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AMENDMENTS

Amendment 1

Recital 7

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
7. There exists a large variety of voluntary activities throughout Europe organised by civil society or public authorities and these activities should be preserved, developed further and made interoperable.	7. There exists a large variety of voluntary activities throughout Europe organised by civil society or public authorities and these activities should be preserved, <u>and developed further, and made interoperable cooperation between voluntary organisations should be encouraged.</u>

Reason

The concept of interoperability requires too much explanation and is difficult to apply to volunteer systems in some countries. Harmonisation and centralisation of volunteering is not the purpose of the European Commission's proposal, but making voluntary activities interoperable could well be interpreted in that way. What is desirable is that young people — if they so wish — should be able to do voluntary work in another EU country. This should be made easier than at present by encouraging cooperation between voluntary organisations.

Amendment 2

Recital 13

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
13. Despite these efforts, there are still obstacles to the cross-border mobility of young volunteers across Europe and this Recommendation therefore aims primarily at providing a framework for Member States to intensify their cooperation, without prejudice to the diversity of their national schemes.	13. Despite these efforts, there are still obstacles to the cross-border mobility of young volunteers across Europe and this Recommendation therefore aims primarily at providing a framework for Member States to intensify their cooperation, without prejudice to the diversity of their national schemes <u>voluntary activities.</u>

Reason

Not all EU countries have national schemes for volunteering. This would mean that some countries would have to introduce national schemes and this would contravene the subsidiarity principle. By replacing the word 'schemes' by 'voluntary activities' or 'opportunities', the text would be applicable to all EU countries and would conform with the subsidiarity principle without losing too much meaning.

*Amendment 3***Recital 14**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
14. In the framework of this Recommendation, cross-border volunteering activities should be defined as a voluntary engagement in which the young volunteer takes part in a non-profit making unpaid activity to the benefit of the general public in a country other than his or her country of residence. Such an activity is characterised by the following aspects: open to all, young people under 30 years of age, undertaken by own free will, fixed period, with clear objectives, structure and framework, unpaid but pocket money and coverage of expenses.	14. In the framework of this Recommendation, cross-border volunteering activities should be defined as a voluntary engagement in which the young volunteer takes part in a non-profit making unpaid activity to the benefit of the general public in a country other than his or her country of residence. Such an activity is characterised by the following aspects: open to all, young people under 30 years of age, undertaken on a voluntary basis, for a fixed period, with clear objectives, structure and framework, <u>and are not subject to remuneration.</u> but pocket money and coverage of expenses.

Reason

In some cases, young people do have the funds to contribute themselves to a voluntary project. Moreover, making their own contribution (however much or little) creates a 'commitment' and makes young people honour-bound to actually go and do volunteering abroad.

*Amendment 4***Recital 15**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
15. Special attention should be paid to young people with fewer opportunities as volunteering constitutes a particularly valuable possibility of mobility for those young people who otherwise would benefit less, or not at all, of mobility schemes. These young people have specific training and mentoring needs that should be taken into account. Support to the training and mobility of socio-educational instructors specialised in youth and youth leaders will be very useful in this context.	15. Volunteering constitutes a particularly valuable possibility of mobility for young people. In view of this, disadvantaged young people who would like to volunteer and who would otherwise benefit less, or not at all, from <u>opportunities for mobility, require various forms of support.</u> Support to the training and mobility of socio-educational instructors specialised in youth and youth leaders will be very useful in this context. <u>Moreover, the opportunities which local and regional authorities have to reach this target group more effectively should be utilised.</u>

Reason

In many Member States, youth policy is mainly shaped by local and regional authorities. Moreover, local and regional authorities are the closest of all authorities to young citizens. This is therefore the most suitable level to get through to young people with fewer opportunities.

*Amendment 5***Recital 16**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
16. Better interoperability of national schemes and more information sharing may stimulate all young Europeans whatever their nationality to engage more in volunteering in third countries.	16. Better <u>interoperability of national schemes cooperation between voluntary organisations in Europe</u> and more information sharing may stimulate all young Europeans whatever their nationality to engage more in volunteering in third countries.

Reason

See amendments 1 and 2.

Amendment 6

Recital 17

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
<p>17. Since the objectives of this Recommendation cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore, by reason of scale and effects of this Recommendation, be better achieved at Community level, the Community may adopt measures in order to promote mobility of young volunteers through interoperability of national schemes, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity as set out in Article 5 of the Treaty. In accordance with the principle of proportionality, as set out in that article, the present Recommendation does not go beyond what is necessary in order to achieve those objectives.</p>	<p>17. Since the objectives of this Recommendation cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore, by reason of scale and effects of this Recommendation, be better achieved at Community level, the Community may adopt measures in order to promote mobility of young volunteers through interoperability of national schemes <u>by enhancing cooperation between voluntary organisations</u>, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity as set out in Article 5 of the Treaty. In accordance with the principle of proportionality, as set out in that article, the present Recommendation does not go beyond what is necessary in order to achieve those objectives.</p>

Reason

See amendments 1 and 2.

Amendment 7

Article A

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
<p>A. Promote the mobility of young volunteers across Europe by enhancing the interoperability of national schemes for volunteering whether organised by civil society or public authorities, so that every young person shall have the opportunity to volunteer in Europe if she or he wishes to do so.</p>	<p>A. Promote the mobility of young volunteers across Europe by enhancing the interoperability of national schemes for volunteering <u>cooperation between voluntary organisations</u> whether organised by they be civil society or public authorities, so that every young person shall have the opportunity to volunteer in Europe if she or he wishes to do so.</p>

Reason

See amendments 1 and 2.

Amendment 8

Article B(1)

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
<p>B(1) improve the level of knowledge of volunteering schemes within their national territories and transfer this information to the European Commission for further dissemination;</p>	<p>B(1) improve the level of knowledge of volunteering schemes <u>opportunities</u> within their national territories and transfer this information to the European Commission for further dissemination, <u>inter alia, via a European Youth Volunteer Portal and a database of voluntary work;</u></p>

Reason

See amendment 2.

*Amendment 9***Article B(4)**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
B(4) share the information on opportunities for volunteering with other Member States and simplify as far as possible the application process in order to make it easier for young volunteers of a Member State to access and apply to the national schemes of other Member States;	B(4) share the information on opportunities for volunteering with other Member States and simplify as far as possible the application process in order to make it easier for young volunteers of a Member State to access and apply to the national schemes <u>voluntary activities</u> of other Member States;

Reason

See amendment 2.

*Amendment 10***Article B(7)**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
B(7) develop basic quality standards in order to promote a reasonable level of quality assurance to reassure and protect volunteers going cross-border and to build confidence and encourage participation in cross-border schemes; these could relate to the level of training of volunteers and staff, activity preparation, mentoring, tracking and follow-up;	B(7) develop basic quality standards in order to promote a reasonable level of quality assurance to reassure and protect volunteers going cross-border and to build confidence and encourage participation in cross-border schemes <u>activities carried out in particular by young people with fewer social and educational opportunities</u> ; these could relate to the level of training of volunteers and staff, activity preparation, mentoring, tracking and follow-up;

Reason

See amendment 2.

Volunteering can open up a way to inclusion for young people with fewer opportunities. They especially need extra encouragement to do cross-border volunteering.

*Amendment 11***Article B(14)**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
B(14) give particular attention and provide tailored approaches to young people with fewer opportunities in order to enhance their access to voluntary activities and especially to trans-European types of volunteering, and take the specific training and support needs of these young people into account;	B(14) give particular attention and provide tailored approaches to young people with fewer <u>social and educational opportunities</u> , or who are disadvantaged on account of their geographical situation, in order to enhance their access to voluntary activities and especially to trans-European types of volunteering, and take the specific training and support needs of these young people into account;

*Amendment 12***Article 2**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
2. encourage and organise, in liaison with Member States, a systematic exchange of information and experiences about the interoperability of national volunteering schemes organised by civil society or public authorities;	2. encourage and organise, in liaison with Member States, a systematic exchange of information and experiences about the interoperability of national promotion of European cooperation on volunteering schemes organised by civil society or public authorities;

Reason

See amendments 1 and 2.

*Amendment 13***Article 4**

Text proposed by the Commission	CoR amendment
4. report to the Council four years after the adoption of this Recommendation to determine whether the measures proposed are working effectively and to assess the need for further actions.	4. report to the Council four years after the adoption of this Recommendation by 2011 to determine whether the measures proposed are working effectively and to assess the need for further actions.

Reason

In the European Parliament an initiative to declare 2011 the European Year of Volunteering has been signed by 454 MEPs. The Committee of the Regions also supports this initiative. In 2011, moreover, it will have been ten years since the International Year of Volunteers was held. Thus, an excellent moment, just beforehand, for the European Commission to publish a report on volunteering.

Brussels, 26 November 2008.

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