

## Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Voluntary activity: its role in European society and its impact

(2006/C 325/13)

On 6 April 2006, the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on *Voluntary activity: its role in European society and its impact*

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 7 November 2006. The rapporteur was Ms Koller, and the co-rapporteur was Ms Gräfin zu Eulenburg.

At its 431<sup>st</sup> plenary session, held on 13 and 14 December 2006 (meeting of 13 December 2006), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 127 votes to 9 with 17 abstentions.

### 1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC urges the Commission to announce a Year of Volunteers, and to publish a White Paper on voluntary activity and active citizenship in Europe at the earliest opportunity. This could underline the relationship between these two phenomena and stress their scale and importance. As most voluntary activity takes place at local level, this White Paper should contribute to a strategy for strengthening the European dimension of voluntary activity, and promoting active European citizenship and the role of identification with Europe in the European integration process.

1.2 The governments of the Member States should be encouraged to frame national policies on voluntary activity and strategies ensuring that voluntary activity is encouraged and recognised. These national policies should also cover the role of infrastructure in facilitating voluntary activity. The EU can provide a framework and encourage greater exchange of best practice between Member States.

1.3 In all the Member States a legal framework must be drawn up to guarantee the right to carry out voluntary activity independently of an individual's legal or social status. There should be equal opportunities for all individuals engaging in voluntary activity, including people with disabilities. In some Member States the legal environment still impedes the development of voluntary activity and, as a result, makes it difficult to enlist stronger social support. Sometimes its development is restricted or even prevented by legal provisions such as prohibitions on activity. These restrictions should be examined and voluntary activity promoted by means of a legal framework which makes provision for insurance and the reimbursement of expenses.

1.4 In the EESC's view, apart from governments, other stakeholders such as parliaments, regional and local bodies, and civil society organisations should recognise the importance of voluntary activity and play an active role in promoting it, thus emphasising the role of voluntary activity and raising its social prestige.

In addition, the EESC would emphatically draw the Commission's attention to the decisive role of civil society organisations in organising voluntary activity.

1.5 At the same time, in the interests of preparing individuals for voluntary activity, the EESC feels that it would be useful to highlight the relationship between civil society and schools. In primary education, more attention must be paid to educational activities aimed at developing social awareness and involvement in solving social problems of general interest. For example, from the age of 15, as part of a 'social and environmental year', practical activities could be provided as an option for young people, to encourage them to carry out important and useful voluntary activities. Particular support should be given to NGOs enabling children to undertake their first voluntary activities.

1.6 In its efforts to promote the recognition of informal and non-formal learning, e.g. through the Europass and the recommendation on key competences, the EU should put particular emphasis on the recognition of competences acquired through voluntary activities. The implementation of Europass-Youth would help to enhance recognition of voluntary activities of young people.

1.7 The EESC therefore recommends that all the Member States and the EU itself design a policy on voluntary activity setting out a strategy and specific programmes to promote voluntary activity, with proposals for targeted support and for public awareness-raising, promoting partnership between civil society and business and promoting public recognition of the activities performed by volunteers. This could include a suitable legal framework to support voluntary activity. The EU can provide a framework and ideas, as well as promoting the exchange of best practice between Member States.

1.8 At European level we need reliable and comparable statistics on the scale, importance and socio-economic value of voluntary activity. This research should be based on a uniform definition of voluntary activity. It should address the needs and motivation of volunteers, as well as the reasons why some people do not wish to become involved in voluntary activity. Ways must be sought at European level of determining the contribution of voluntary activity to the national income and its effects on society. Eurostat could play a coordinating and initiating role here. All the statistical offices of the Member States of the EU should have statistics of this kind available.

1.9 The EESC recommends that EU funding, policies and programmes should do more to promote voluntary activity, and that an adequate infrastructure be put in place throughout Europe to support voluntary action. At present, one source of support for voluntary activity from the European Union comes in the form of the European Voluntary Service Programme (EVS), which has so far sent nearly 40 000 (18-25 year-olds) volunteers to 31 EU Member States and partner countries for periods of between six months and one year. At the same time, voluntary service in developing countries is funded from development aid. The EESC considers these sources insufficient and would like the European Union to adopt a more active, consistent and coherent approach to voluntary activity, making pan-European volunteer programmes available to all population groups rather than being restricted purely to long-term voluntary service by young people.

1.10 The EESC would also welcome a specific recommendation for the promotion of voluntary activity by senior citizens, for example with pilot actions for partnerships and exchange of experiences and which would be among the first initiatives to be launched.

1.11 Moreover, voluntary activity, as a contribution to European projects, should be recognised as equivalent to co-financing. Application forms for European projects must also be made simpler and less bureaucratic, so that voluntary organisations are able to take part in these projects.

1.12 Information needs to be disseminated more widely, as unfortunately it often fails to reach those concerned. All possible channels must be used to achieve this. A special website with information could be set up, accessible from all existing voluntary activity websites with a single mouseclick. European networks of volunteer organisations have an important role to play here. They can ensure that organisations exchange experience and best practice and that the needs and requirements of volunteers on the ground are passed on to the EU institutions. They must be promoted in a targeted way as part of the infrastructure for promoting voluntary activity.

1.13 The European Union can make an important contribution to promoting and ensuring the public recognition of voluntary activity by supporting the United Nations' International Volunteer Day on 5 December and celebrating and honouring voluntary activity on that day. The 2001 International Year of Volunteers showed how important effective government-supported publicity programmes can be. If a European Year of Volunteers was declared at European level, as proposed by the EESC, it would help to ensure support and recognition at European level for numerous local volunteer activities, besides giving volunteers a sense of European identity.

1.14 In order to give fuller recognition to the importance of volunteering for the development of Member States, the EESC recommends adopting a European-level charter establishing the role of voluntary organisations, including their rights and duties. In order to improve the economic situation of voluntary organisations in the Member States, the EESC recommends introducing a legal basis in Community law whereby such organisations would be exempted from VAT. The main purpose of enshrining the role, rights and duties of voluntary organisations in the proposed European charter is to create uniform guidelines for organisations which could be granted special legal status in conjunction with special economic and other rights.

## 2. Introduction

2.1 Voluntary activity makes an invaluable contribution to society. In Europe more than 100 million volunteers devote their leisure time to a multitude of activities which benefit third parties and serve the common good. The work of civil society organisations, which is often performed exclusively or to a great extent by volunteers, is winning ever greater recognition from companies, government bodies and the public <sup>(1)</sup>.

2.2 And yet the true value of voluntary activity goes far beyond the provision of services and the satisfaction of social needs. The motivation which underlies it, that is the desire to make a contribution on one's own initiative to the common good and to help shape society, promotes values such as altruism and solidarity and thus forms a counterweight to increasingly widespread isolation and egoism in modern societies.

2.3 Voluntary activity is inextricably linked with active citizenship, which is the cornerstone of democracy at local and European level. People take part in the life of society not only through political participation but also through the specific solution of social problems. By working for society they can translate a desire to help shape society into action. Individuals either sacrifice their leisure time, or engage in voluntary service for others and work for the common good, often at considerable risk to their financial well-being or health. It is this very form of European active citizenship which gives people a strong sense of belonging to society. Voluntary activity can therefore be regarded as one of the best examples of participation and thus an essential component of, or even a precondition for, active citizenship.

2.4 Voluntary activity also promotes personal development: the development of social awareness on the one hand and, on the other hand, the development of key competences and skills, making volunteers more employable and enhancing their active

<sup>(1)</sup> The EUYOUNG 2003-2005 study, financed by the European Commission, on the social involvement of young people shows, for example, that in all eight participating European countries young people trust civil society organisations more than government bodies.  
[http://www.sora.at/images/doku/euyoung\\_finalcomparativereport.pdf](http://www.sora.at/images/doku/euyoung_finalcomparativereport.pdf).

participation in society. In its various manifestations voluntary activity offers an opportunity for informal <sup>(2)</sup> and non-formal <sup>(3)</sup> learning and thus, alongside formal <sup>(4)</sup> learning, plays an essential part in achieving lifelong learning.

2.5 Voluntary activity also makes an essential contribution to our economies' output. This contribution is often overlooked in national statistics, as it does not always involve the exchange of goods of monetary value and because there is no single accepted method for measuring its economic value. Where it is measured, however, the economic value of voluntary activity and its contribution to the economy has proved considerable <sup>(5)</sup>. For example, in the United Kingdom the economic value of voluntary activity is estimated at 7.9 % of GDP, with 38 % of total population engaged in voluntary activity. In Ireland and Germany more than 33 % of the population are involved in voluntary activity in one form or another, compared to 18 % in Poland.

2.6 In addition, transnational voluntary service at European and international level can substantially increase solidarity and mutual understanding among peoples, and promotes intercultural dialogue. In this context the EESC welcomes the Commission's intention to extend the European Voluntary Service, making it more visible and more effective.

2.7 Solidarity and a sense of responsibility for others, together with the urge for individuals to feel useful, are essential sources of motivation for voluntary activity. It creates social links, contributes to social cohesion and promotes quality of life and social progress in Europe. It thus encapsulates the values of European integration, as set out in Article 2 of the EC Treaty and Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. Moreover, voluntary activity is an essential expression of participatory democracy, which is recognised in the European Constitutional Treaty as a component of the democratic life of the EU. Volunteers and voluntary activity are both in the public interest. Voluntary activity should be given due recognition in all the Member States of the European Union.

2.8 The EESC has already touched on the subject of voluntary activity in its opinion on 'Hospice work — an example of voluntary activities in Europe', adopted in 2002 (rapporteur: Ms Gräfin zu Eulenburg).

<sup>(2)</sup> **informal learning:** Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random).

<sup>(3)</sup> **non-formal learning:** Learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

<sup>(4)</sup> **formal learning:** Learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective. Source: COM(2001) 678.

<sup>(5)</sup> Based on the 'Facts & Figures Research Project' research document (2004-2006), published by the European Volunteer Centre (CEV) (<http://www.cev.be/facts&figures.htm>)

Voluntary activity has also been mentioned in other contexts in the EESC's work, but no opinions have yet been drawn up specifically on the subject <sup>(6)</sup>.

2.9 Within the EU the contribution of voluntary activity is being increasingly recognised in the social, cultural and environmental areas and voluntary organisations are being involved to a greater extent in political and other decision-making processes, for example in the fields of lifelong learning, health and consumer protection, development, trade, etc. The EESC welcomes these initiatives, although it feels that not nearly enough has been done so far.

2.10 The EESC is pleased that voluntary activities by young people have been set as a priority of the policy process launched by the Commission in 2001 and as part of the open method of coordination. On the basis of the progress already achieved in the Youth sector, the Commission is encouraged to take the development of voluntary activities further by addressing horizontal aspects within a holistic approach.

2.11 An international precedent was set by the proclamation of 2001 as the Year of Volunteers by the United Nations, thus helping to focus public opinion on voluntary activity, and providing renewed encouragement for people to volunteer and showing how government can recognise, support and promote it. At the initiative of the UN, 5 December of each year is International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development. It would be good if the EU were also to raise public awareness in Europe of this important event.

2.12 However, we feel that all in all both the European Commission and national governments should take a greater interest in voluntary activity. This is one of the reasons why the EESC welcomes Commissioner Wallström's request for the Committee to draw up an opinion on this important subject.

### 3. The concept of voluntary activity and its characteristics

3.1 In practice and in theory voluntary activity is often defined in different ways, and it is difficult to devise a definition of voluntary activity which covers all its various facets. The various definitions used in the European Union countries have three essential criteria in common:

— Voluntary activity is an act carried out on an individual's own initiative and of his own free will. It cannot in any way be obligatory. This ensures the volunteer's commitment to and identification with the activity.

<sup>(6)</sup> The following work by the EESC is relevant to voluntary activity: EESC opinion on *Youth Policy*, rapporteur: Ms van Turnhout (OJ C 28, 3.2.2006, pp. 35-41); EESC opinion on the *Youth in Action Programme 2007-2013*, rapporteur: Mr Rodriguez-Garcia-Caro (OJ C 234, 22.9.2005, pp. 46-51); EESC opinion on *Making European citizenship visible and effective*, rapporteur: Mr Vever (not published in OJ as yet); EESC opinion on the *Active citizenship action programme*, rapporteur: Mr Le Scornet (OJ C 28, 3.2.2006, pp.29-34).

- Voluntary activity is unpaid and is not undertaken for financial gain; expenses incurred by the volunteer may however be reimbursed.
- The aim of voluntary activity is to work for people outside one's own family or for other social groups and thus to be useful to society as a whole (although voluntary activity is undoubtedly of great value for the personal development of the volunteer).

There is some disagreement as to whether only regular activities fall within the definition: does the definition, for example, also include assistance to neighbours or the time banks which have been developing in recent years, or can voluntary activity only take place in a formal, structured way? Nevertheless, fulfilling the above-mentioned three basic criteria is an essential condition for any activity to qualify as voluntary, whether it takes the form of voluntary activity for the local community or organised voluntary service. In general it can be said that a broad definition is most appropriate to the various manifestations of voluntary activity.

3.2 The purpose of voluntary activity is not to replace paid work — indeed, it is highly desirable that paid work should not be substitutable by voluntary activity. The special value of voluntary activity derives from its contribution to shaping society. It is not merely the provision of a social service, nor is it intended to take over the basic tasks of government. The essential added value of voluntary activity consists of:

- the creation of social and societal ties; stronger identification with society and feeling of solidarity by all those involved in voluntary activity;
- participation by citizens in actively shaping communities.

3.3 Voluntary activity takes on diverse forms; this very diversity makes it difficult to categorise. The most diverse social groups are involved in voluntary activity, although the scale of their involvement varies from one EU Member State to another: the proportion of volunteers active in each area and their profile (age, background, level of education etc.) varies greatly from one country to another.

3.4 In addition to formal activities carried out under the auspices of a specific organisation there is also informal work and also types of voluntary activity which remain hidden (e.g. in many cases voluntary activity by migrants).

3.4.1 The diverse forms of voluntary activity include, inter alia:

- participation in public life and civic commitment;
- involvement in matters of public interest, organisation of awareness-raising campaigns, legal advice and consumer protection;

- charity work, assistance to others, and to the elderly and disabled in particular, in the neighbourhood, or in the area of development aid;
- work for the good of the immediate community, for example in special situations such as the aftermath of environmental disasters, etc.;
- mutual help and self-help groups;
- involvement in religious associations;
- Citizens in various 'honorary' posts who are involved in political and scientific activities, or in managing or operating smaller associations or sports clubs.

3.4.2 Voluntary activities can also be categorised according to field of activity, such as sport, culture, social work, health, education, youth, environmental protection, disaster relief, politics, consumer protection, development cooperation, etc.

3.5 Voluntary service is a special form of voluntary activity. It is limited in time from the outset and is often the volunteer's sole activity, in contrast to most voluntary activity which is additional to other activities such as training or employment. There is usually a mutually agreed set of rules and responsibilities under volunteer service, often in the form of an agreement between the partners of the project, including the volunteer, unlike voluntary work carried out continuously in the volunteer's spare time. There are different forms of voluntary service in terms of:

**Voluntary activities** are all kinds of voluntary engagement. They are characterised by the following aspects: open to all, unpaid, undertaken by own free will, educational (non-formal learning aspect) and added social value.

**Voluntary service** is part of voluntary activities and is characterised by the following additional aspects: fixed period; clear objectives, contents, tasks, structure and framework; appropriate support and legal and social protection.

**Civic service** is a voluntary service managed by the State- or on behalf of the State e.g. in the social field or in civil protection.

**Civilian service** is an alternative to compulsory military service in some countries, but not voluntary (?).

3.6 A clear distinction can be made between two kinds of volunteering: (i) one which, as defined by the UN and the ILO, involves working for a not-for-profit organisation for pay which is often below the going rate and (ii) the other which is unpaid but during which expenses are reimbursed. Moves to clarify the legal status of these activities should take account of this distinction in order to simplify the situation for volunteers as well as for students on compulsory placement at NGOs.

(?) COM(2004) 337 final.

Voluntary work as defined by the ILO and UN agencies is work carried out in not-for-profit organisations, i.e. charitable associations or humanitarian or non-profit-making non-governmental organisations by 'voluntary' workers who usually receive **remuneration in the form of a salary**. They are salaried employees, the voluntary nature of their work being defined by the fact that their wages are often below market rate; this is what defines and constitutes its voluntary element and nature. For example, a logistician working for an emergency humanitarian organisation, or a lawyer working for a refugees' rights association will be a salaried employee, but with a different (i.e. lower) salary than he could expect in the world of business (e.g. transport or legal consultancies).

Calls are often made for the European Voluntary Service programme (EVS) to be expanded and enhanced. This is a service that puts young people at the disposal of associations or NGOs in return for some form of compensation and expenses (board and lodging) and includes an allowance, as with traineeships. It provides a way of making young people available, as part of their higher education courses (a traineeship abroad is required for almost all courses with an international or European dimension) to these associations and NGOs.

Involving young people in humanitarian or general interest projects by paying a fixed allowance is a source of mutual enrichment. While it is legitimate to clarify the legal status of the allowance, there must be no confusing charity and voluntary work.

3.7 This opinion does not discuss paid voluntary work within the meaning of the ILO and UN definition, such as activity by Médecins Sans Frontières.

3.8 In recent years there has been further diversification of the forms of voluntary activity and the reasons for undertaking it, arising from new social values and developments. The interest in and demand for voluntary activity is growing, but improvements in financial and budgetary resources, infrastructure and recognition have not kept pace with this growth.

3.8.1 For volunteers the benefits of voluntary activity include meaningful use of leisure time, developing social skills and making contacts, as well as acquiring and exchanging experience. The acquisition of knowledge or of a better understanding of one's own character and abilities are becoming increasingly characteristic of volunteer activity by young people, not least in order to meet the requirements of the knowledge-based society. The opportunity to learn a foreign language and about other cultures by doing voluntary service abroad is another factor influencing the decision to become a volunteer. In the context of European integration this promotes mutual understanding between cultures. Cross-border voluntary projects such as volunteer fairs in Euregios could be of great importance in relation to the development of European citizenship.

3.8.2 Civil society organisations and volunteer centres will recruit volunteers more easily if they take account of new reali-

ties in our society, examples being changes in youth culture, greater use of the Internet and opportunities for volunteering online. They also need to be aware of new ways of contacting young people e.g. via text messages, and to offer short-term voluntary activity as an initial step for young people. Besides this, they should pay attention to new forms of leisure behaviour and the time available to interested members of public, and to new target groups such as migrants, the long-term unemployed or the increasing number of pensioners who wish to become involved.

3.9 In summary, voluntary activity is a horizontal phenomenon which affects many policy areas in society and which involves a large section of the population. However, it may be noted that few volunteers come from disadvantaged backgrounds or socially marginalised groups.

#### 4. The general socio-economic role of voluntary activity in European society

4.1 Most international literature on the subject tends to analyse the role of voluntary activity based on its contribution to social or economic life. As already pointed out, its derives its essential value from its contribution to active citizenship, and its effects are often difficult to quantify: social commitment, feeling of belonging, identification with society, solidarity, feeling of responsibility for society and the promotion of social cohesion are all difficult to measure.

4.2 A suitable approach, illustrated in research work on civil society (e.g. Putnam, 2000) <sup>(8)</sup>, is 'social capital', to which voluntary activity makes a significant contribution. Social networks, contacts, values and public attitudes as well as mutual trust are of great importance for the social (and economic) development of regions. If in a particular area there are many civil society organisations and volunteers, other economic and social indicators also tend to be positive. Voluntary activity significantly increases the social capital of a society, as it creates social networks and links.

4.3 To the generally used quantitative indicators for a country's development (essential economic indicators like economic growth and financial balance) new, alternative indicators need to be added, which measure social capital and social cohesion as well as the contribution of voluntary activity. The economic value of voluntary activity should also be quantified, as proposed by the United Nations in its Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts.

4.4 This is also in line with the emphasis on sustainable development, which strives for a global system in which environmental sustainability, solidarity and democracy are promoted alongside economic success. It is also in line with the objectives of the Lisbon strategy, under which the three areas of the economy, social questions and the environment are considered

<sup>(8)</sup> Robert D. Putnam (2000): *Bowling Alone — The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon and Schuster. New York.

inseparable in the overriding context of sustainable development and which sets out to exploit synergies between these areas more effectively. Volunteers make an essential contribution in all these areas: promotion of social cohesion, environmental activities as well as the reintegration of (long-term) unemployed into the job market, and this needs to be measured.

4.5 The Youth Pact adopted by the European Council in 2005 as part of the renewed Lisbon strategy, also calls on young people to become involved in voluntary activity <sup>(9)</sup>.

4.6 International studies and experience suggest that voluntary activity could be promoted in an even more effective and targeted way in the various areas.

4.6.1 For example, a start can be made during children's education, socialisation and upbringing on ensuring that they eventually become active members of their communities. A special, inspiring role is played in this process by organisations carrying out social programmes, whose members are mostly children and young people.

4.6.2 Volunteering can play a special role in combating youth and long-term unemployment, as well as generally in relation to entering the labour force.

Volunteers can accumulate important experience and knowledge which is in demand in the labour market and build up a network of contacts. Apart from activities in the social sphere and in health care, which are traditional areas for voluntary activity, volunteers can also acquire key competences and knowledge in areas like publicity, communications, self-expression, social skills, management and vocational training.

They have the opportunity to try out various social roles, to learn to make the right decisions, to solve problems, to assimilate a work culture and to demonstrate their sense of justice and leadership qualities. Voluntary activity can form an important part of a person's CV and career. Voluntary activities are thus an important instrument of non-formal and informal learning that complement formal learning, education and training. They may also enhance employability, particularly of young people.

4.6.3 In relation to active ageing voluntary activity is of twofold importance. On the one hand it enables older people to continue to be involved in the life of society, to make use of their life experience and to continue to feel useful. This has a positive effect on their health and quality of life. Secondly, voluntary activity can promote understanding between generations when young and old act together, exchange experience and support each other.

<sup>(9)</sup> The European Youth Pact was adopted by the Spring 2005 European Council as part of the revised Lisbon Strategy and aims at improving education, training, mobility, vocational training and social inclusion of young people while facilitating the reconciliation of working life and family life. In this context the European Council called on the Union and the Member States to encourage the mobility of young people by removing obstacles for trainees, volunteers as well as workers and for their families. Annex 1 of Presidency Conclusions of the European Council, Brussels, 22-23 March 2005 (7619/05).

4.6.4 Voluntary activity can give various marginalised population groups an opportunity for involvement and integration, either because volunteers are working for them or because through their own commitment they are brought back to the centre of society. This kind of empowerment through voluntary activity is particularly important for socially marginalised population groups and migrants. Unfortunately, in some countries the law is holding this process back; for example, in some Member States immigrants cannot become volunteers.

4.6.5 The importance of various self-help groups should also be mentioned. The main characteristic of such groups is that people with similar problems in a wide range of areas come together and share experiences to help one another.

4.6.6 Companies and employers also play a role in promoting voluntary activity. On the one hand their employees and skilled workers can acquire social skills and increase their creativity and work motivation through voluntary activity outside the company and as a result feel more committed to their company. On the other hand, companies are increasingly aware of their social responsibility: mutually beneficial partnerships between volunteer organisations, local and national government and companies help to mobilise skills locally and to harness these in shaping the community. Social dialogue, mutual learning, and joint agreements can contribute to greater recognition and support for voluntary activity, which is part of social responsibility.

4.6.7 The EESC is concerned that, as a result of the lack of a legal definition or basis for voluntary activity in many Member States, volunteer organisations and voluntary activities are often denied public recognition. Sometimes potential is not recognised, where for example voluntary activity is not taken into account in the framework of measures for the integration of young people, the unemployed or migrants. Moreover, volunteers are often in a very difficult position, for example in terms of taxation, social security or insurance. It is vital to push for legislation to clarify the legal status of volunteers and to give every citizen the right to engage in voluntary activity. Furthermore, the EESC calls on the Member States to eliminate labour law shortcomings which prevent the use of volunteers to carry out important work in the public interest, especially in the event of disasters. All too often employees are still dependent on the goodwill of their employer, for instance to give them time off work.

4.6.8 The EESC recommends that the relationship between, and tasks of, government, business and volunteer organisations be clearly defined. Voluntary activity certainly plays an important role in our societies, but it is not intended to provide basic social services or replace government action. The aim of policy must be to promote voluntary activity as such, not to institutionalise it, as it would then lose its *raison d'être* and its special value as the outcome of free choice.

4.6.9 The EESC nonetheless believes that the government has the task of providing the necessary infrastructure for voluntary activity. Voluntary activity may be unpaid but it is not free, as it does entail costs. Experience in a number of European countries also shows that specific infrastructure for voluntary activity significantly increases its scale and quality. Supporting and advising volunteer organisations and motivating volunteers, training them and providing them with support and backup, as well as reimbursing their expenses, all cost money — but are very worthwhile investments. The State has an active role to play, in planning national strategy and raising public awareness, as well as in coordination. To enable a better understanding of

voluntary activity, the State should provide funding for studies, and there should also be a strong emphasis on bringing the volunteer ethos into education.

4.6.10 At the same time all the players involved (government, business, trade unions and volunteer organisations) must work together if voluntary activity is to be promoted and encouraged and its recognition in society enhanced. Effective networking between volunteer organisations for the exchange of best practice and the pooling of resources is essential here, as is dialogue and cooperation between the various sectors.

Brussels, 13 December 2006

The President  
of the European Economic and Social Committee  
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

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#### APPENDIX

#### to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

The following amendment attracted more than a quarter of the votes cast, but was rejected during the course of the deliberations:

#### Delete point 3.6

##### *Reason*

This is an extremely important opinion, as it is one of the few EESC opinions to discuss volunteering so comprehensively. The definitions and examples included in the opinion are important, because future opinions of this type will make use of them when distinguishing between voluntary activity and social services.

The purpose of this amendment is to delete the definitions used by the UN and the ILO. I do not feel there is any reason for the EESC to refer to these definitions in its opinion, as the Commission proposal on which the opinion is based only concerns volunteering in its purest form, i.e. voluntary activity for which the volunteer does not receive any remuneration.

Adoption of my amendment at the plenary session would make the opinion clearer and avoid unnecessary confusion on the part of the reader; it would also make the opinion more concise.

##### *Voting*

For: 53

Against: 61

Abstentions: 24

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