

# The Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe

## Volunteering in Transition

Or why I don't need 1960's idealists to tell me all about it

*At the end of February, the second Training Course on Transnational Voluntary Work was run within the Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission on European Youth Worker Training. For Luis Amorim, one of the course trainers, the course was an opportunity to reflect upon the current debate about what should be the core values of voluntary service. What should be the main purpose of volunteering? Personal development or the development of the community or society? In this article, Luis Amorim argues for a wider definition, which corresponds better to the reality of today's society.*

As fan as I am of words, I could not resist looking up the meaning of 'voluntary' in the dictionary, first the Portuguese one (my beloved native tongue) and then the English one (my beloved adopted language). The word has its origin in the Latin 'voluntas', i.e. will, which explains why voluntary refers to something 'proceeding from the will or from one's own choice or consent' (Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Inc. Publishers, USA, 1983). This explains why, in English, to volunteer means to offer one's services to others or to a cause, and to do so spontaneously without coercion or any legal constraint. I suppose this also serves the argument that most voluntary work should be unpaid, and derive from a genuine motivation of doing good and helping others; thus words such as altruistic, self-sacrificing, humanitarian, philanthropic and non-egotistical come to mind (surely a diverse palette of words to strike us with mighty awe for the value of volunteering). But living as I do on the threshold of a new century—and though history is all about continuation, concepts do tend to evolve into new dimensions—I cannot stop myself wondering whether this definition of volunteering still bears witness to the social context in which we find ourselves, in the Europe of the year 2000.

### The current debate on volunteering

My interrogation relates to a wider debate that is taking place today amongst all those that care about and do something for volunteering, particularly with and for young people, and who try to position themselves in a conceptual spectrum that stretches between the traditional notion of volunteering as an intentional individual choice to do something for the sake of others and society in general, and the opposite view that sees in volunteering mainly a potent instrument of personal development and growth. My point in this article will not be to replace one with the other but to argue for a more encompassing definition of volunteering where both approaches are given the relevance they deserve. My wish is that this will help to create a more flexible and contemporary perspective on volunteering, and be a step further away from the intransigent stance of the original voluntary work movements in Europe, which were middle-class oriented and stemming in their overall design from the charitable and moralising work of 19th century religious groups and institutions.

My personal interest in this debate really began in the training course on Transnational Voluntary Work, which was organised within the Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission on European Youth Worker Training (Budapest, 27 February to 5 March, 2000); and where, as one of the trainers, I was asked to engage myself in a dramatised discussion with a representative from the National Agency of the European Voluntary Service (EVS) on the value, purpose and core ideas of volunteering. As you might have guessed by now, I chose to stand for the personal development approach and my colleague for the collective good approach. Though forced to defend opinions that were grossly exaggerated, to add some more controversy to the confrontation and keep the participants absorbed in what was going on, I remember thinking, while counter-arguing his presentation, that I was indeed close to believing what I was saying. In today's world volunteering is more about personal development than self-sacrifice and a wish to help others in need. In the heat of the debate I shouted across the room to my colleague, in the true spirit of the role-play: 'we are not in

By Luis Amorim



the 1960's anymore, we are not the flower-power generation, we want jobs! A cynical and cold assumption, you might think. Far from it, I would rather call it a realistic and actually socially engaged approach.

### **In 1988, for me, volunteering was still about absolute altruism**

When I started as a volunteer in 1988 for AFS in Portugal at the age of 18 (AFS Intercultural Programs is a worldwide NGO that promotes in more than fifty countries intercultural academic and non-academic exchanges for young people and adults), I was motivated by the prospect of helping others like myself to go abroad; in a way, to try to repay the time, attention and love that others had given me in order to prepare me for the life-changing experience that studying in Flanders for a year was. It was only later that I realised that while helping new applicants to our year-programme to get in shape for the cultural and other shocks of leaving one's homeland and moving somewhere else in the world, I was also developing my own interpersonal skills, getting a better grip of who I was and, generally speaking, becoming better at organising people and events. Those of you who are familiar with the ins and outs of non-formal education theories are by now nodding your heads and thinking how true this is in all youth-related activities, where young people are actively involved. In my case, personal development awareness came at a later stage in the process of volunteering for the organisation I am still committed to. In 1993 I would become Secretary-General of Intercultura (AFS in Portugal) and my views on volunteering had changed little; it was still about making time to contribute to a greater need and good and, if any personal gains resulted from it, they were a side effect and something to be modest about; they were not legitimate motivations to volunteer.

### **Personal development does not devoid volunteering of its meaning**

In 1996, when I started to work for the European Youth Forum as Education Project Officer I was given an assignment that at first I shook my head at in vehement resistance. I was asked to coordinate a Pilot project within the then incipient European Commission's programme, European Voluntary Service (EVS). What was the aim of the project? To work with a group of local organisations dealing with young people in socially excluded situations and to stimulate volunteering amongst them as a means of fighting their exclusion. My dislike for the project came from the realisation that we would be asking the participants to volunteer without them coming up with the idea themselves; this was little less than manipulation. The organisations' idea, however, was that an experience abroad as volunteers could be extremely beneficial for the youngsters in question. They had as their main expectations, more self-esteem and increased responsibility for the participants, but other things such as the development of new interpersonal and language skills were part of their objectives too. Tolerant as I have always tried to be, I was soon won over by the sheer enthusiasm of the social workers in the project. The group of 12 participants, who went for periods from three weeks to six months to different countries in Europe, came back completely

changed. While before their departure the large majority of them had not been outside their hometown, had been out of work or school, or seemed not to see much sense in doing anything consistent in life, after volunteering abroad they came back resolute, affirmative and, what was more touching to observe, with dreams and aspirations and long-term, feasible projects. It had worked; stimulating them to volunteer had yielded results far above my own poor initial expectations. I was glad to be proved wrong.

The truth is that the appearance of a publicly funded voluntary work programme at European level (the EVS) made travelling abroad and being a volunteer accessible to a whole new profile of participants, no longer limited to middle-class, well-educated individuals, who are ready to take advantage of the many opportunities that parents and national and European institutions put in their hands. The fact that the European Commission placed the inclusion of young people in difficulty at the top of the agenda of the programme is proof of that ideal and vision. It is a well documented fact that young people in situations of social exclusion, or in its 'environs', seldom take the initiative to step forward to work for the progress of their local communities, much less so of communities thousands of kilometres away. However, few of us would deny their potential to contribute if given the right chance. What social workers are doing with the help of the EVS—through multinational projects such as the "Step by Step" and the "ENVOL" networks, to give just two examples—is to use volunteering as a tool for personal development whose outcomes will be better social integration for the participants but which ultimately will be of benefit for the whole of the social webbing. Unfortunately, many of the organisations that have been working with volunteering in Europe feel that its use for this purpose is somehow voiding voluntary work of its virtues and making it more an instrument of social engineering than of community development. Well, let me tell you, they are wrong.

### **Volunteering is also about inclusion**

By making volunteering accessible to those who would not spontaneously contribute to society's general good, social workers are presenting young people with an opportunity to help themselves and simultaneously others around them. It is a two-way process that in the end brings positive effects to all involved. Would anybody dare say that socially excluded young people do not have any contribution to make to the communities and organisations in which they volunteer? I sincerely hope not. And what can we say of the potential of these young people to become role models for others who may follow in their footsteps without any external push from a concerned social worker? Peer pressure can also have positive consequences; it all depends on its content. I concede that the burden put on the host organisations' shoulders is bigger, and that accompanying someone in or with difficulties is a greater responsibility than doing so for one of the traditional high-flyers who still make up the bulk of volunteering. However, it is less admissible to say that this kind of pedagogically reinforced support, which is needed to handle this target group, makes volunteering less significant in its nature, if what we desire is to promote a truly inclusive policy for young people at all levels.



While working at the European Youth Forum and later at the European Commission's external agency for the EVS programme—Structure for Operational Support (SOS)—I heard voluntary work NGOs complain several times that the fact that the programme was of no cost to the participants put the true spirit of volunteering at risk: if young people did not pay for anything, their willingness to do something for others would not be the main motivation, but would instead be about obtaining a cheap way to travel abroad. First of all, statements of this kind always make me wonder in how low regard these NGOs hold their main client group, young people; they seem to be saying 'if we don't make them pay we cannot make sure that they are truly altruistic.' In addition, I ask myself if it is not possible to combine both the wish to give something back to society with the possibility of travelling cheaply. They are not incompatible, are they? Furthermore I ask, what about the millions of young people with no money to pay for voluntary work programmes to 'prove' their humanitarian ideals? Should they be left out?

### **There is nothing wrong with personal interest**

It seems that more and more young people are volunteering for personal development reasons. Voluntary work NGOs are the first ones to say that 90% of their participants are either students who have finished their secondary school education or university graduates who wish to have an experience that will enhance their skills and competencies while simultaneously helping other people. Figures for the EVS programme show that circa 30% of the participants in the programme during 1997 and 1998 decided to do so to acquire professional experience. This, together with learning a new language and personal skills, made up the vast majority of the reasons for joining the programme. It is evident from their answers that a wish to increase their professional potential (employability) played a great role in their choice of this voluntary work scheme. After all, we live in a world where much of our social recognition happens through our professional integration: life has become occupational, and it is usually those who have a job who say to the unemployed that work is not everything in life. All this may be a nice thought, but far from a practical one, when so much of our well-being is based on our ability to consume and obtain material goods. Though materialism may not be the ideal, in the western world, access to the societal self and identity construction depends on having a job and joining the 'throngs' of producers-consumers. That is why unemployment so often leads to exclusion in all its forms and why young people dread it so much. And who are we to say that they are not right?

I think that the personal development component of volunteering needs to be given more credit and needs to be validated by both the private and public sector institutions involved in it. If more young people are attracted to volunteering because they perceive in it a chance to increase their personal skills and find a job—and hopefully, this perception will soon be the same amongst employers too—it is our duty to make sure that the programmes on offer provide them with exactly that. Volunteers will still bring with them their freshness and enthusiasm, their various abilities and capacities and their willingness to help. Personal interest does not have to be detrimental to the

collective interest. Personal interest may be a stepping-stone to help young people to (re)discover the pleasure that lies in giving and that sometimes the best possible reward one can have is the giving itself.

More important in my view is that an inclusive approach to volunteering will allow us to tackle the issue of socially excluded young people too—who do need more incentives to participate actively in society. This alone should justify our moving away from a type of volunteering that is in so many cases elitist and a by-product of the worries of socially integrated, middle-class people and, eventually, a lot less altruistic than one might be led to believe. Like a Nigerian immigrant asked in the training course mentioned above in Budapest: 'Why do you send volunteers to help in Africa? Why don't you give us the money so that we can volunteer ourselves in our own countries? I'll tell you why, because you want to develop your own skills, to learn new things, to grow as individuals, while helping the locals. In the end you are thinking about responding more to your individual needs than to ours.' Like her, I think it is admissible to ask what comes first, the egg or the chicken? At the end of the day both are essential but there should be no embarrassment in recognising that individuals yearn for personal development through voluntary work and to accept this as their main motivation. Volunteering is not what it used to be and, after all, what good is tradition without a zest of modernity? No more than an empty box with no relevance for the future.

*Note: **Lúis Amorim** currently works as Senior Project Manager for the Structure of Operational Support for the European Voluntary Service in Brussels. The opinions stated in the article are those of the author and do not express in any way those of his employer or those of the European Commission on this topic. You can reach the author at*

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