

The European Year of Volunteering

The view from the European Commission

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All in all it is estimated that 94 million people, or 23% of Europeans aged 15 and older engage in some form of voluntary activity and the average age of volunteers is between 30 and 50. Volunteers tend to be employed and are well educated. Men outnumber female volunteers in 11 European Union (EU) countries, and the numbers are roughly equal in a further nine countries. This may be explained by the dominance of volunteering in sport, which attracts the most volunteers in the EU. Sport is followed by volunteering in the social sector, aid to the disadvantaged and in the health sector.

We have many good examples of volunteering throughout Europe. Take the work of young volunteers in the European Voluntary Service (EVS), which is celebrating its 15th anniversary in 2011. Since 1996, the EU has given 50 000 young people the opportunity to do voluntary service abroad through EVS – currently part of the Youth in Action programme. Adding a European dimension has enriched volunteering experiences. EVS volunteers gain language skills and get to know other countries and cultures. In this way, EVS provides for the learning mobility promoted by the Youth on the Move initiative, thereby contributing to the volunteers' personal, social and professional development.

Volunteers are often described as being the 'glue' that holds society together. Volunteering usually is a rich learning experience for the individuals concerned. Volunteering helps develop one's social skills and competences; it contributes to solidarity, non-discrimination, social inclusion and the harmonious development of European societies. It is a vehicle for building a sense of citizenship. At the same time, volunteers render a valuable service to local communities, while also building ties between organisations across Europe and thus strengthening the development of a European civil society, a true win-win situation.

Each EU member state has a different perception of volunteering, depending on cultural attitudes, traditions and historical context. For example, participation in formal volunteering structures appears to be very low in some eastern European countries, where the legacy of forced or state-sponsored 'voluntary' activities under communism has tainted the attractiveness of organised, structured volunteering. In southern member states informal volunteering, for example in the family and the neighbourhood, appears to be very strong, whereas formal volunteering, for example in fire brigades, is generally more developed in the northern and western parts of the EU. There are also differences between member states that offer civic services and others that have voluntary activities exclusively run by civil society organisations. Others have a mix of both.

Despite these differences, member states are willing to enhance their co-operation and create more opportunities for young people to volunteer in another EU country. It was in this spirit that youth ministers adopted in 2008 the first ever recommendation in the youth field on the mobility of young volunteers across the EU.¹ The recommendation seeks to boost co-operation between organisers of voluntary activities, whether civil society organisations or public authorities, by opening up to young people from other EU countries.

The European Year of Volunteering 2011 is an occasion to highlight the wonderful work done by the millions of volunteers. The timing of the European Year of Volunteering is no coincidence: the EU can maximise the impact of its work in this field because there is also an international focus on volunteerism in 2011 as the United Nations celebrates the 10th anniversary of its International Year of the Volunteer 2001.

When we talk about 'voluntary activities' in a European context, we refer to all types of voluntary activity, whether formal, non-formal or informal, and which are undertaken of a person's own free will, choice and motivation, without concern for financial gain. This rather broad 'definition' has been chosen on purpose to capture the wide spectrum of traditions and cultural attitudes towards volunteering that exist across the EU member states today.

The volunteering sector in the EU faces a number of challenges. National volunteering strategies are rare and in many countries there is no clear legal framework for volunteering to cover issues such as the social insurance of volunteers, their training, entitlement to holidays, accommodation or reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses.

At the same time, the increasing professionalisation in the volunteering sector is creating a growing mismatch between the needs of volunteering organisations and the aspirations of volunteers. Younger volunteers, for example, are less willing to commit to long-term volunteering periods, while this is increasingly requested by certain volunteering organisations. Coupled with this is the problem that skills and competences gained through volunteering activities are hardly recognised.

Another problem for volunteering organisations is sustainable funding: due to the large increase in the number of volunteering organisations over the past years, there is now more competition for the available funds.





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Finally, there is a lack of comparable data on voluntary activities in the different EU member states.

Against the backdrop of these challenges, the European Year of Volunteering 2011 seeks to raise awareness of volunteering, focusing on four main objectives.

The first objective is to foster an enabling environment for volunteering in the EU. This means that we want to see the European Year of Volunteering provide input for further policy development and that it initiates dialogue both within member states and between them and Europe's partners. We want to encourage the exchange of good practices on how to remove obstacles to volunteering, for example by clarifying volunteers' entitlements to reimbursement of expenses or their level of protection while they are performing voluntary activities.

The second objective is to empower volunteering organisations and improve the quality of volunteering. We hope to see new Europe-wide networks that encourage co-operation, exchange and synergies between volunteering organisations and other sectors, especially the corporate sector.

The third objective is to reward and recognise volunteering activities.

On the one hand this means that we are keen to see progress on improving the formal validation of skills and competences gained through volunteering. The Youthpass, implemented in the framework of the Youth in Action programme, already provides a good example. On the other hand, this means improving the availability of comparable EU data on volunteering, so we can improve our policies based on evidence.

The fourth objective is to raise awareness for the value of volunteering, its contribution to the economy, society and the lives of individuals, among the general public, and among policy makers and government officials, both within Europe and its partner countries.

It is encouraging that so many interested parties and stakeholders want to get involved in the European Year of Volunteering and make tangible contributions to it. The European Commission is determined to ensure that the European Year leaves a lasting legacy which will set the scene for continued improvements for volunteering in the years to come. What is more, the theme of volunteering will continue to play a role in 2012 during the European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity. Volunteering is a good way to keep senior citizens active, and where young volunteers assist the elderly, volunteering is an excellent example of solidarity between generations.

Clearly, the momentum we gain now will not be lost anytime soon! Everyone is invited to volunteer – to volunteer to make the European Year of Volunteering a success.

1. Council recommendation of 20 November 2008 on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union, 2008/C 319/03, 13 December 2008 (OJ).