

2011/2293(INI) - 20/09/2011 Non-legislative basic document

PURPOSE: Communication on EU Policies and Volunteering: Recognising and Promoting Cross-border Voluntary Activities in the EU

BACKGROUND: Volunteering contributes to the Europe 2020 growth strategy, in particular to the EU's employment rate target of 75% by 2020, by helping people learn new skills and adapt to changes in the labour market. A study found that the voluntary sector could contribute up to 5% of Gross Domestic Product.

The year 2011 has been designated as the [European Year of Voluntary Activities](#) promoting Active Citizenship. The European Year gives the Commission the opportunity to take stock of volunteering in the EU and its contribution to society. It also allows the Commission to evaluate what the EU and Member States can do to facilitate and promote volunteering, notably in cross-border situations.

CONTENT: this Communication discusses the benefits of volunteering. It notes that volunteering is an important creator of human and social capital, a pathway to integration and employment and a key factor for improving social cohesion. It is a highly visible expression of European citizenship, as volunteers contribute to shaping society and helping people in need. Its potential can be further developed within the Europe 2020 Strategy for growth. Volunteers are an important resource in our economy and society, but must not be considered as an alternative to a regular workforce. By promoting cross-border volunteering in cooperation with Member States and through EU funding programmes, the EU contributes to the mobility and inter-cultural learning of its citizens and reinforces their European identity.

The Communication also sets out the challenges. On the basis of a study of eight industrialised countries by the Johns Hopkins University and the experience of the European Year 2011 so far, the potential obstacles to volunteering, in particular across borders, were identified as follows:

- lack of a clear legal framework in almost one in five Member States;
- lack of national strategies for promoting voluntary activities regarding training, holiday benefits, social security, entitlement to unemployment benefits for cross-border volunteering activities, accommodation and reimbursements of out-of-pocket expenses;
- financial constraints, with organisations based on voluntary activity often facing a lack of sustainable funding;
- mismatch between supply and demand: the increasing trend towards professionalising the voluntary sector causes a certain mismatch between the needs of volunteering organisations and the aspirations of new volunteers. Volunteers are available for short-term projects while organisations need people to make long-term commitments;
- skills that are gained through volunteering activities are not always sufficiently recognised or given credit;
- Member States apply different tax treatments to volunteers' income/allowances and to the reimbursement of the expenses. Consequently, volunteers may encounter tax obstacles when operating across borders;
- insufficient data: better comparable data on volunteering in the Member States can help identify best practices and improve policy making.

Whilst Member States made some progress on these issues in 2006 when they committed to cooperating on overcoming obstacles that impede mobility, there is still work to do. Particular attention needs to be paid to the promotion of an environment for volunteering activities providing equal opportunities with regard to access and participation of all individuals.

The Communication discusses EU funding opportunities for volunteering, and the social dimension, including volunteering as an expression of European citizenship as well as the benefits in terms of education and sporting activities and humanitarian aid.

Policy recommendations to Member States: in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the Commission does not intend to promote one single model of volunteering or to harmonise volunteering cultures at local and regional level. However, the Commission recommends that Member States make better use of the potential of volunteering in the following ways:

- in countries lacking a volunteering framework and where there is a weak tradition or culture of volunteering, setting legal frameworks could give incentives to support the development of volunteering;
- research and data collection on volunteering should be encouraged at the national level. In this context, the use of the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work and the United Nations Handbook on Non-Profit organisations is recommended;
- recognition of the competences and skills gained through volunteering as non-formal learning experiences is essential as a motivating factor for the volunteers and one that creates bridges between volunteering and education;
- Member States should remove remaining obstacles which directly or indirectly impede volunteering in general and in particular cross-border volunteering;
- Member States are invited to open national volunteering schemes for cross-border volunteering to contribute to the development of volunteering in the European Union.

Concrete actions to recognise and promote volunteering at EU level: the EU is committed to ensuring a long-term follow-up to the 2011 European Year of Volunteering and to continuing the dialogue with the relevant stakeholders in the different policy areas related to volunteering. The Communication makes the following points:

- the Commission will propose the creation of a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps in 2012;
- EU funding programmes in different policy areas will further target volunteers and promote cross-border volunteering;

- the Commission will make it easier for EU citizens and stakeholders to get an overview of different funding programmes that can be used by volunteers and for voluntary activities;
- the Commission is willing to further explore possibilities to strengthen the link between volunteering and health/welfare, in particular with regard to the ageing society;
- on the basis of Member States' reports on the implementation of the Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers in 2012, the Commission will make proposals for further development;
- the Commission may introduce proposals that specifically cater for volunteering in the EU's employment strategy, in its fight against poverty and social exclusion and in the context of the Commission's "[New Skills for New Jobs](#)" initiative;
- the Commission is preparing a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning including the recognition of competences acquired through volunteering;
- the future '[European Skills Passport](#)' (Europass) will give individuals the possibility of keeping a record of the skills and competences they acquire through volunteering;

Lastly, the Commission will give the forthcoming [European Year of Citizens \(2013\)](#) an appropriate volunteering dimension, promoting notably cross- border volunteering.