The EU has a rich tradition of volunteering. The importance of voluntary activity has long been recognised by the EU institutions and advisory bodies, as well as the Council of Europe and the United Nations.

It is widely accepted that volunteering contributes to social cohesion and to the personal development of volunteers.

However, across the EU, volunteering faces challenges stemming from societal changes (greater individualism and emergence of new kinds or forms of civic participation) and from other obstacles (lack of awareness, support systems, a legal status, limited international exchange schemes).

The European Commission has therefore made a proposal for a Council Decision on the European Year of Volunteering 2011. European Years are aimed at raising public awareness and drawing the attention of national governments to an issue.

The opinion of the European Parliament is mandatory, and is foreseen for the beginning of 2010.

In this Briefing:
- Issue definition
- What is volunteering?
- Political background
- Proposal for a European Year of Volunteering in 2011
- A focus on Youth Volunteering
- Main references

Issue definition

Volunteering is a cross-cutting issue. It concerns all age groups and all sectors. According to the European Commission (EC), it has not fully developed its potential in the EU. Counting on broad support by EU institutions, bodies and NGOs, the EC made a proposal for a European Year of Volunteering in 2011 (EYV). The aim is to foster favourable conditions for this sector.

What is volunteering?

Definition

The concept of volunteering is understood differently across the EU. For example, in German five words correspond to the English term and two in French. However, in spite of the diversity of approaches, common features can be identified. In the ex ante evaluation of the EYV 2011, volunteering has the following features:

- Undertaken of a person’s own free-will;
- Without concern of financial gain;
- Benefits the individual volunteer, communities and society as a whole;
• Often carried out in support of non-profit organisations or community-based initiative;
• Refers to all kinds of voluntary activity, formal or informal;
• Does not replace professional, paid employment.

Although unpaid, expenses may be reimbursed to the volunteer.

Main features

In some Member States (MS), such as Austria and the Netherlands, volunteering is strongly supported by the authorities and volunteer organisations are well-developed. In other MS (Czech Republic, Slovakia), the perception of volunteering is rather negative. In the past, people were forced to participate in "voluntary activities". Furthermore, voluntary organisations are just starting to be set up.

At the end of 2006, most Europeans (65 %) did not participate actively in, or do voluntary work, for any of the fourteen voluntary organisations covered by the Eurobarometer report on European social reality (graph 1). However, 79 % of Europeans considered that helping others or voluntary work was important in their life.

Graph 1: "Do you currently participate actively in or do voluntary work for one or more of the following organisations (EU25)?" Data source: Special Eurobarometer 273, 2007.

According to the Eurobarometer report on family life and the needs of an ageing population, in 2008, 44 % of retired Europeans were planning to or had participated in community work or in volunteering.

The participation rate in voluntary work depends on the type of job and education. It is higher when the education level is high. Moreover, managers participate more in voluntary work than unemployed people.

The case of sporting activities

In the EU, sporting activities rely on volunteering. According to the White paper on Sport (2007), ten million volunteers are active in around 700 000 sports clubs in the EU. Without them, sporting activities would come at a much higher cost. Moreover, many of the social activities related to sport would disappear. However, recruiting volunteers has become increasingly difficult.

The Europe for Citizens Programme supports sporting organisations as well as their transnational projects. Young volunteers in the sport sector can also engage in the European Voluntary Service (EVS), financed by the Youth in Action Programme. The upcoming EU-wide study will deliver at the end of 2009 a specific report on volunteering in sport.

Volunteering and EU regional policy

The voluntary sector also plays a role in the implementation of EU regional policy, for instance in the case of European Social Fund projects. According to the Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion, there is a high degree of collaboration at the local level between authorities and this sector.

A major study is pending

The results of a study on volunteering in the EU should be available in November or December 2009. Financed by the EC, its goals are to describe the volunteering landscape in the EU, to analyse the findings and to provide recommendations for the EU.
**Political background**

**European Commission (EC)**

At EU level, no systematic approach to volunteering exists but rather a thematic one. EC initiatives relate to Youth (Youth in Action Programme, with the EVS), Active European Citizenship (Europe for Citizens Programme) and the Life Long Learning Programme (Grundtvig). Special attention has been paid to the area of Youth (see the last part of this Briefing). As early as in 1997, a European Year of Voluntary Organisations and European Citizenship had been suggested by the EC.

**Graph 2: Proportion of people involved in voluntary work in EU MS.** Data source: Special Eurobarometer 273, 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Proportion of people involved in voluntary work</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>68%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Denmark</td>
<td>58%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<td>Belgium</td>
<td>52%</td>
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<td>Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>3%</td>
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**European Parliament (EP)**

In 1983, the EP adopted a resolution on voluntary work asking inter alia the EC to set up a statute for voluntary workers and to remove obstacles to voluntary work. The EP also adopted a resolution recommending the establishment of a European Voluntary Service Scheme for Young People between 16 and 25.

In 1998, the EP adopted a resolution calling in particular for a thorough analysis of the non-profit-making sector at local, national and EU level. This study would have laid the ground for a European Year of Voluntary Organisations and Active Citizenship.

In 2007, the EP adopted a resolution recognising the importance of volunteering for civil society and for increased solidarity. Once again the EP called for a pan-European study. MS and the EC were encouraged to support volunteering. The EP recommended that 2011 be designated European Year of Volunteering (EYV).

In September 2008, the EP made a written declaration calling upon the EC to announce 2011 as the EYV. The declaration, signed by 416 MEPs, was proposed by Members from the five largest political groups.

**Council of the EU**

In 2007, the Council adopted a resolution inviting the EC to organise a European Year, aimed at improving the image of volunteering in society in general, and among young people in particular.

**European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)**

In 2006, the EESC issued an opinion in which it stressed the role of civil society organisations in organising voluntary activity. It also urged the EC to announce a Year of Volunteers, and to publish a White Paper on voluntary activity and active citizenship in Europe.

**Committee of the Regions (CoR)**

The first opinion of the CoR on volunteering dates back to 1998. In 2008, the CoR recognised the considerable economic contribution of volunteering to the EU economy at all levels. According to the CoR, volunteering should not be confined to the areas of citizenship and youth affairs. It encouraged the EP to be more proactive in dealing with the universal nature of volunteering. The CoR recommended that 2012 be designated EY of Active Citizenship through Volunteering.
Volunteering in the Lisbon Treaty
Art.165 refers to the specific structure of the sport sector, based on voluntary activity. Art.214 deals with the setting up of a Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps.

Forecast for the EP plenary sitting is February 2010. Article 308 of the Treaty was chosen as the legal basis, as the Treaty does not explicitly provide the powers to underpin this action: Council takes appropriate measures, acting unanimously on an EC proposal, and after consulting the EP.

Procedure for the EYV 2011
The consultation procedure is used. The EP and the Council are expected to endorse the Commission proposal early next year.

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Other organisations:
- The Council of Europe (CoE)
The CoE recognised in 1985 the importance of voluntary action. As stated in the recommendation adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly in 2001 and in the reply from the Committee of Ministers, the CoE considers that voluntary action represents a major component of the social assets of a society, especially for the consolidation of democracy. In September 2009, seventeen Members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE signed a motion for the promotion of volunteering in Europe as engine of democratic citizenship and social inclusion. In January 2009, the Conference of International NGOs of the Council of Europe called upon the CoE as well as the EU to jointly declare 2011 EYV.

- United Nations (UN)
2001 was proclaimed Year of Volunteers by the UN. The UN stressed the role of volunteering in strategies aimed at poverty reduction, sustainable development and social integration. The General Assembly adopted a resolution emphasising the contributions of volunteers to society and encouraged all people to volunteer. Furthermore, the International Volunteer Day is celebrated each 5 December.

- NGOs
An alliance of European volunteering associations called upon the European institutions to declare 2011 as the EYV.

The European Years
Since 1983, "European Years" are organised at EU level nearly every year (except in 1991, 2000 and 2002). Their goal is to raise public awareness and to draw the attention of national governments to an issue. A broad variety of themes have been chosen so far. The choice is made in advance so that campaigns can be set up. They can be organised with the collaboration of the Council of Europe. The European Commission proposes the theme to the European Council and to the European Parliament. The European Commission is then responsible for its implementation (conferences, exhibitions, debates, depending on the theme).

The proposal is based on the acknowledgment that volunteering represents an expression of European social values, such as solidarity and non discrimination. It fosters social cohesion, as well as the personal development and employability of volunteers. Volunteering is facing new challenges in adapting and modernising its policies and infrastructures: greater individualism; the emergence of new types of participation; the lack of awareness and of training; discouraging legal provisions; limited international exchange schemes and the absence of a legal status. The main policy options have been assessed in the EC's ex ante evaluation. It concluded that a EYV would be an appropriate mechanism to get MS involved in these issues.
The goal of the EYV 2011 is therefore to encourage and support, notably through exchanging experience and good practices, the efforts made at all levels to develop volunteering in the EU. The four objectives of the Year are:

- To work towards an enabling environment for volunteering in the EU;
- To empower voluntary organisations and improve the quality of volunteering;
- To reward and recognise volunteering activities;
- To raise awareness about the value and importance of volunteering.

The competencies of the EU are limited in the field of volunteering. Therefore its action will be restricted to the support of MS efforts, respecting the subsidiarity principle. At EU level, good practices will be exchanged and awareness raising measures will be implemented. At MS level, similar activities will be organised. The EYV 2011 will build on efforts made by all EU programmes supporting volunteering, such as Life Long Learning, Europe for Citizens, humanitarian aid, development policy, human rights, health, the environment and consumer protection. They will benefit from the additional visibility brought by the EYV.

**A focus on Youth Volunteering**

Around 16% of young people are engaged in voluntary work in the EU\(^\text{13}\). Volunteering provides young people with experience and skills that can improve their self-confidence, integration in society, and their employability. In 2004, a Resolution by the Council of the EU set four common objectives as regards voluntary activities for young people: to develop, facilitate, promote and recognise voluntary activities. They were confirmed in 2007 by another Resolution, which included measures to reinforce their implementation. The European Youth Pact, adopted by the Council of the EU (2005), encourages young people to volunteer with a view to enhancing active citizenship. Moreover, cross-border volunteering has recently been promoted by a Recommendation adopted by the Council of the EU on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU.

The European Voluntary Service (EVS) is aimed at young volunteers. It is financed by the Youth in Action Programme. Between 1996 and 2006, around 30,000 volunteers participated in the EVS, and 5,000 in 2008\(^\text{14}\). The EVS is transnational, full-time and participation is up to one year. The EVS promotes solidarity, active citizenship and mutual understanding. The YOU::VOL project, co-financed by the EU, gave an overview of barriers faced by young volunteers. Financial problems can stop potential volunteers, as well as the lack of information. Furthermore, according to a working document of the EC\(^\text{15}\), many MS do not have a legal status for young volunteers, nor specific provisions for their protection. They often do not evaluate or monitor volunteering.

**Lessons from a previous European Year**

The ex post evaluation of the European Year of Education through Sport (EYES, 2004) reported that its main goals were achieved. However, actions aimed at promoting the contribution of volunteering in sport activities had limited impact.

The proposed EU budget amounts to €6 million. In addition, €2 million will finance preparatory work. Community and national initiatives will be co-financed. The EYV will be implemented in close cooperation with the MS, the EP, the EESC, the CoR and civil organisations. In addition, the EC may cooperate with the UN and the CoE.

**Main references**


Disclaimer

This Briefing is a short overview of the subject, and is not intended to take the place of more complex original research. The document has been prepared in response to a specific request and does not in any way reflect the opinion or position of the author or of the European Parliament.

1 See European Year of Volunteering, CNS/2009/0072 (OEIL).
3 The European Social Fund (ESF) is one of the EU’s Structural Funds. It is devoted to the promotion of employment in the EU. For more information on the European Social Fund, see the ESF website of the European Commission.
6 Resolution on a European Voluntary Service Scheme for Young People, OJEC C 010, 16 January 1984, p.286-287.
9 Recommendation Rec(85)9, Council of Europe, 1985.
12 List of European Years on the website of the European Parliament.