

Conference of the Civil Society Organisations' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee, Gdańsk, 7 July 2022

'Volunteers – citizens building the future of Europe'

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



CONFERENCE

Volunteers – citizens building the future of Europe

KONFERENCJA

Wolontariusze – obywatelki i obywatele budujący przyszłość Europy

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European Solidarity Centre, Gdańsk, Poland

Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, Gdańsk, Polska

In the framework of the mission of the Civil Society Organisations' Group to Gdańsk, 6 to 8 July 2022



Volunteers: essential actors in European societies

- The **Covid-19 pandemic** unleashed an unprecedented **societal energy** which translated into an **explosion of informal and formal voluntary activities** within European societies;
- Similar towering levels of energy are now put towards assisting **Ukrainian refugees** and the **fundamental societal contribution of volunteering** cannot be underestimated;
- Even in non-crises periods, volunteering plays a crucial role **beyond service provision** and **new types of volunteering**, e.g. corporate and civic service volunteering, are emerging;
- All types of volunteering play a pivotal role in **building social capital, social inclusion** and **cohesion**, encouraging **inter-generational cooperation** and bringing together individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds;
- Volunteering is also an important source of **self-development**, improving key and transferable **life-long skills** and contributing to the **reduction of the digital divide**;
- Through creative and innovative actions, volunteers provide **supplementary** and **complementary assistance**, of free will, free of charge and with the aim of serving the **common good**;
- In effect, volunteering constitutes the most obvious example of **civic engagement** and **active citizenship per se**.

How to strengthen volunteering across the EU

- Despite the difficulties in understanding, recognising and measuring the **added value of volunteering**, it is imperative to **increase social awareness** of its pivotal contribution to European societies;
- A first step in this direction must be the availability and sharing of **reliable models** and **data** that **measure the economic contribution of volunteering**, which currently accounts for more than **2% of GDP** in many countries;
- In order to fully acknowledge the value of volunteering to society, **measuring its contribution to GDP** should become mandatory;
- **Poland** and the city of **Gdansk**, which is the '**European Volunteering Capital 2022**', constitute positive examples of **enabling environments** for the effective development of volunteering and for the measurement of its economic contribution;
- In this context, good national practices for **collecting data** should be shared with **Eurostat**, with the aim of **standardising methodologies** across the EU;
- However, additional data on the **contribution of volunteering beyond GDP** are also necessary, in order to demonstrate its **holistic contribution to European societies**. For example, the impact of volunteering on improved well-being, social cohesion, health, environmental protection, etc.;
- Crucially, in order for the voluntary sector to prosper and grow at the local and national levels, it will also be necessary to introduce **enabling policy and/or regulatory and legal frameworks**. These should be decided on a **country specific** basis and in direct **consultation with civil society organisations**;
- Moreover, it is imperative that there is regular and effective dialogue, mutual learning and partnership between **civil society organisations, national and local authorities**;

- **Structured and sustainable funding** in order to maintain **independent and quality services**, as well as safe and good levels of support and infrastructure for volunteering (e.g. volunteer centres, training, psychological support), are also essential.
- Finally, as recognition of the work carried out by volunteers, particularly young people, **skills attained** should be **acknowledged** and **certified**, thus adding them to their **qualification** and **skills records** at the national and European levels.

Bringing volunteering back onto the European political agenda

- In the years following the '**2011 European Year of Volunteering**', the topic of volunteering has slipped off the EU political agenda. Nonetheless, the **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE)**, placed **citizens squarely within the political arena**. In this context, the follow-up to the CoFE constitutes an **opportunity to be seized by civil society organisations**, including the voluntary sector;
- Specifically, **citizens as volunteers**, should be at the **centre of the future EU agenda**. Civil society organisations, must have a key role in the **co-creation and co-implementation of national and European policies**, through fruitful **structured dialogue** and **partnership**;
- Constructive participation and an **emphasis on 'people'**, which defines the nature of the voluntary sector, will render **EU policies more acceptable** to the wider population and hence, more successful;
- The **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)** and the "**Civil Society Organisations' Group**" in particular, have over the years striven to maintain volunteering on the **EU political agenda**, as one of the main instruments for achieving the multi-dimensional objectives of the **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**;
- In this context, the EU should develop and actively support a **more comprehensive European-wide voluntary programme**. Building on the European Solidarity Corps, the scope of the programme should be widened to **include all ages and more policy sectors**;
- In addition, the EU should create an **EU-wide volunteering website** with information on volunteering opportunities across **all EU regions and countries**;
- Finally, the **EU is called upon to designate 2025 as the 'European Year of Volunteers'**.

Brussels, 22 July 2022