



New trends in the development of volunteering in the European Union

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



European Economic
and Social Committee



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AUTHORS	<i>Prof Dr Lucas Meijs and Puck Hendriks MSc assisted by Afrodita Dobрева MSc</i>
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CONTACTS	<i>+31 10 4081921, lmeijs@rsm.nl</i>
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IDENTIFIERS

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Foreword



By Séamus Boland

*President of the Civil Society Organisations' Group
European Economic and Social Committee*

There is no doubt that volunteers play a major role in shaping our societies and responding to societal needs. During extreme climate and weather events, which we have seen increasing, or the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteers – often supported by civil society organisations – were and continue to be at the forefront of the emergency response, showing solidarity and providing essential services to those in need. Furthermore, volunteers are part of our daily lives. In Europe, one in five people aged over 16 is involved in voluntary activity, in one way or another², demonstrating the enormous potential of the sector, both in its economic value and its societal impact.

The benefits of volunteering are manifold, as the EESC has underlined in several opinions³. While it should not replace the basic tasks of governments, volunteering creates societal ties, solidarity, as well as social and cultural capital, to name only a few. Beyond the mere provision of services, volunteering is also an example of active participation in shaping our societies, which, I am convinced, is key for the health of our democracies.

Crucially, let us not forget that volunteering in its essence is about offering one's free time to act upon values and objectives and improve the life of human beings. Every day, volunteers undertake activities out "*of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor*", as defined by the UN⁴.

However, and despite its major potential, the topic of volunteering has in recent years been less present in the European debate. Little continues to be known about the characteristics of the actual volunteers and volunteering activities, as well as about the major changes, challenges and opportunities the sector has experienced in the last ten years and is facing in the future.

I am therefore pleased to commend to you this report on "*New trends in the development of volunteering in the European Union*", which was commissioned by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), at the request of the Civil Society Organisations' Group.

The study, which was carried out by the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, defines the terms "volunteer energy", "volunteer opportunities" and "volunteerability". These offer insights into the different kinds of volunteers and volunteering activities, as well as some major European trends. It focuses on five EU countries with very different traditions in terms of volunteering, i.e. the Netherlands, Spain, Hungary, Croatia and Finland.

² Eurostat (2015), "Social participation and integration statistics".

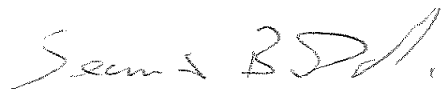
³ Cf. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/tags/volunteering>.

⁴ UNV (2018), State of the world's volunteerism report.

What is particularly interesting to me is that the study reveals the emergence of "spontaneous volunteering" and the, seemingly opposed, increasing involvement of "third parties", such as companies or educational institutes.

Firstly, we have indeed seen that crises often provoke spikes in solidarity, which however tend to fade over time, and it is worth underlining the key role that civil society organisations are playing in sustaining and structuring this volunteer energy. Secondly, when it comes to "intermediaries" in the management of volunteers, which are newcomers in the sector, it is essential that volunteers are provided with a *safe* and *quality* volunteering environment. Especially when involving young people, organisations must be supported so that no volunteer is being taken advantage of, so that sufficient health and safety measures are in place and, crucially, so that every volunteer is provided with adequate support and training, an aspect which is particularly important in the case of international volunteering or service learning.

To conclude, this study will undoubtedly stimulate the debate on these topics. My hope is that it will also lay the ground for informed decisions that take into account the value of volunteering and the recent development in the sector. I wish you a good read!



Séamus Boland
November 2021

Executive Summary

Volunteering is continuously changing: new people become volunteers, new forms of activities arise and new parties become involved. “**New trends in the development of volunteering in the European Union**” contains the results of a research project on changes in the European Union within the field of volunteerism, volunteering and volunteer activities. The most general concept, volunteerism, consists of two connected and inter-related parts: supply (from potential volunteers) and demand (from organizations). Volunteer activities, actual observable volunteering, are created when supply and demand come together. The objective of the study is to create classifications of potential volunteers (supply) and potential volunteering opportunities (demand) to explain that particular combinations will lead to actual volunteering or volunteer activities. The number of potential volunteers can be explained at the macro level by institutional factors. The amount of potential volunteer opportunities can be explained by the volunteering infrastructure. Potential volunteers, potential volunteer opportunities and the matching process are investigated by combining a theoretical and empirical perspective. The theoretical part provides a theoretical framework to analyse volunteerism, volunteering and volunteer activities based upon academic literature. The empirical part is based upon interviews and desk research and focusses on five countries: the Netherlands, Spain, Hungary, Croatia and Finland. This selection is based on a representation of the following criteria:

- Dominant emotions concerning volunteering (see Dekker 2002): unpaid labour (Croatia, Hungary), active membership (Netherlands, Finland) and active citizenship (Spain)
- Dominant perspectives on the value of volunteering to society (see Bos, 2014): welfare (Hungary, Croatia), economy (Netherlands), democracy (Spain, Finland) and community (Netherlands)
- Nonprofit regimes (Salamon and Anheier, 1998): Corporatist (Netherlands, Spain), Social Democrat (Finland) and Statist (Croatia, Hungary)

The theoretical perspective

Potential volunteers are conceptualized as ‘volunteer energy’ (Brudney & Meijs, 2009), referring to the notion that some individuals will offer to volunteer when asked or given the opportunity. This is the supply side of volunteering. ‘Volunteer energy can be measured according to the concept of volunteerability, which translates the concept of employability to the context of volunteering. Volunteerability is composed of three elements: willingness, capability and availability (Meijs et al., 2006). At the individual level, volunteerability is influenced by various factors, including the volunteer tradition of the local context, volunteer motivation, incentives provided, perception of volunteering and individual resources. Although the greatest influence on the supply part is exerted by national institutional factors (e.g. nonprofit regimes, volunteering discourse and religion), emergencies (e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic) can provoke spontaneous eruptions of volunteer energy almost independently of national institutional factors.

Indeed, the national differences between the 5 countries are considerable. First of all, that the countries have different types of non-profit regimes (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001) leading to variations in the size of their nonprofit sector and the roles of nonprofit organizations. The most important roles are the service role (consistent with the economy and welfare discourses on value for society) and the expressive role (consistent with the democracy and participation discourses on value for society) (Hilger, 2005). Activities of service-oriented non-profits are related to social services, education, housing, health care and community development (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2018). The purpose of the activities of non-

profits with an expressive role “is the actualization of values or preferences, such as pursuit of artistic expression, preservation of cultural heritage or natural environment, political mobilization and advocacy, or the enhancement of the quality of life” (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001; p.15). Clearly, the size of the non-profit sector has a direct link with volunteer participation because “the non-profit sector represents the organizational resource base that, at least in part, promotes and sustains volunteer participation” (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001, p.14). The nonprofit-regime perspective is linked to governments and systems that are either supportive of nonprofit organizations (high volunteering rates) or hostile towards them (low volunteering rates) (see also Kamerade et al., 2016). While government policies are too complex to measure directly, government funding for the non-profit sector can be a tool to measure government attitude toward non-governmental organizations (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2001). Second, from the economic perspective, economic development increases volunteer participation, due to an increase in the number of volunteer-involving organizations as more financial resources become available (demand or opportunities), as well as in the amount of individual capital, in terms of time, money or other resources (supply or volunteer energy). The relationship is nevertheless complicated by the fact that income inequality is likely to play an even more important role in explaining volunteering rates, as it decreases volunteer participation for two main reasons (Damian, 2018). First, citizens with low income are less likely to volunteer due to a lack of resources (actual or perceived). Second, in countries with substantial inequality, there is less trust and cooperation between individuals from different social classes, leading to less social participation in general (Damian, 2018). A third factor is religion, which is known for promoting certain shared values in society such as altruism and solidarity, which promote social involvement (Damian, 2018). The influence of these values stretches beyond religious individuals to other people in their direct environment. Social networks in which there is a norm and social pressure to volunteer influence both religious and secular people (Wiepking and Handy, 2015). In addition to the overall effect of religion, national volunteering rates might differ according to type of religion. For example, historically Protestant and Catholic countries score differently, with the latter generally exhibiting slightly lower volunteer rates.

Volunteer opportunities refer to possibilities for being asked to volunteer. This is the demand side of volunteering. Volunteer opportunities depend primarily on the development of a supporting volunteering infrastructure of volunteer-involving organizations and new partners such as community service in secondary school, corporate volunteering with companies and days of service.

The first key theoretical element to discuss in relation to the volunteering infrastructure is the concept of volunteerability. The concept of volunteerability translates employability into the field of volunteering. The focus is on the following question: ‘What makes a person more or less willing and able to volunteer?’ The answer integrates three levels of analysis (Meijs et al., 2006):

- 1) Micro (individual): Volunteerability refers to the willingness of individuals to volunteer and to have the necessary time, skills, experience and background.
- 2) Meso (organizational): Volunteerability refers to the attractiveness of organizations to potential recruits, their flexibility in creating volunteer opportunities and their success in retaining volunteers.
- 3) Macro (community or societal levels): volunteerability is an expression of societal will and receptivity to volunteerism and of the civic ‘space’ provided for acting as a volunteer.

Volunteerability is also a lens for assessing the attractiveness of particular volunteer activities. In an investigation of why people decide to accept one volunteer offer and reject another according to the volunteerability framework, Doosje (2018) reports that, in choosing specific activities, volunteers do not necessarily make their choices according to whether they like the activity or the organization, but according to their availability or, more specifically, their subjectively experienced availability. They must also feel that they have the right skills and that they can overcome any emotional or physical barriers that the activity might involve. This has been supported by Haski-Leventhal and colleagues (2018), whose results suggest that volunteering can be made more attractive for people in three steps. The first step is to ensure that they have a good feeling about the cause. This involves general promotion of why the organization is useful and how volunteering would help. The second step is to remove barriers that prevent people from volunteering in terms of availability and capability. One important strategy is therefore to ensure that the place and time of commitment are determined by potential volunteers, and not by the organization. Volunteering should fit into the schedule of the volunteer, instead of requiring the volunteer to fit into the schedule of the organization. The choice to return to an activity depends on the extent to which the experience is both meaningful and rewarding.

Efforts to market volunteering should be based on understanding the perspective of the volunteer and fitting the volunteer activity to the life and wishes of the volunteer, instead of the organization. In fact, the marketing of volunteering activities is almost diametrically opposed to simply promoting the concept of volunteering in general. In the broadest terms, the marketing of volunteering is aimed at convincing the volunteer to say ‘yes’ by removing barriers to actual volunteer through the creation of volunteer assignments that are independent of time and place. The focus should be on the recruitability of the assignment, instead of on its useability for the organization.

The second theoretical element is a new classification of volunteers based upon two new trends: third party involvement and spontaneous volunteering. The rise of ‘third parties’ is a relatively recent phenomenon that has been having an influence on volunteering (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010). In the past decade, volunteering matches have started to be made through the involvement of ‘intermediaries’, including companies (corporate volunteering), educational institutes (service learning, community service), the government (welfare volunteering) (De Waele & Hustinx, 2019) specific intermediaries (volunteer centres) (Bos, 2014), organizers of family volunteering, and local/national/international days of service. This is the emerging shared approach to volunteer management in which access to volunteer energy is separated from guidance of volunteers (Brudney et al., 2019).

Almost in diametric contrast to the highly organized third-party model is the growth of the spontaneous volunteer. Although they are quite common in response to disasters, spontaneous volunteers can also be observed in political activism and fundraising. The driving forces behind these efforts include increasing levels of resources (e.g. education) that make it possible for people to do things themselves, along with modern technology, which creates simple access to broad audiences, and social media, which can facilitate action mobilization. In short, there is often less need for a volunteer-involving organization to organize and control volunteer opportunities. People can simply participate in the real or virtual world. Interesting examples could be observed in the countless ‘applaud for healthcare workers’ initiatives emerging during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in earlier fundraising initiatives (e.g. the Ice Bucket Challenge).

The introduction of the third party and the spontaneous volunteer combined with the existing types of volunteers leads to a new classification of volunteers consisting of four profiles:

- 1) The regular, traditional volunteer: This profile fits the pattern of ‘pure’ volunteering within a context of ‘service to others’, with a potential debate concerning the ‘intended beneficiaries’ becoming broader within the context of member-benefit and other types of associations.
- 2) The voluntary third-party volunteer: This profile has a mixed pattern, in which ‘free choice’ and ‘remuneration’ are seen within a broader perspective, although ‘structure’ is regarded in a purer form. The ‘intended beneficiary’ is complex, as these volunteers usually perform activities for people in need, although they also have very explicit instrumental goals for themselves or their third-party organizations (e.g., government, corporations, educational institutes).
- 3) The mandatory third-party volunteer: This profile has a very broad perspective, with the broadest possible interpretation of ‘free choice’, ‘remuneration’ (e.g. preventing the loss of welfare benefits) and ‘intended beneficiary’.
- 4) The spontaneous volunteer: This profile is largely quite pure on the dimensions of ‘free choice’ and ‘remuneration’, extremely broad in terms of ‘structure’ and mixed with regard to ‘intended beneficiary’.

The third theoretical element related to the volunteering infrastructure is the concept of volunteer scenarios (Meijs & Brudney, 2007). A volunteer scenario is a combination of Availability (e.g. when, where, how many hours, how long), Assets (e.g. specific skills or general skills) and Assignments (what will actually be done). It can be used to describe the perspectives of both potential volunteers and volunteer-involving organizations with regard to the match that must be made. A winning scenario consists of a successful, mutually acceptable combination of Availability, Assets and Assignment (AAA or triple A). A losing scenario involves a gap between what the individual wants to offer and what the organization needs. Drawing on the four volunteer profiles outlined previously, four scenarios can be presented for traditional, voluntary third-party, mandatory third-party and spontaneous volunteering. From the perspective of opportunities, the demand, the options must be expanded to include three additional scenarios for episodic, virtual and team-based volunteering.

The Empirical European perspective

This study yields three key empirical findings. First, the European countries addressed in the study differ in terms of the reported percentage of the population volunteering, with underlying aspects of both volunteer energy (supply) and volunteer opportunities (demand). Variations can also be observed with regard to the forms and levels of volunteer activities.

Second, these differences can be explained by national institutional factors (nonprofit regimes, volunteering discourses and religion), which influence volunteer energy, and volunteering-infrastructure factors (volunteer profiles, volunteer scenarios and third parties), which influence opportunities. The relative abundance or lack of opportunities plays a more important role than the relative abundance or lack of energy. With the possible exception of the older generations in Hungary and Croatia, volunteer energy seems to be available in most countries, as demonstrated by the eruptions of spontaneous volunteer at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, even the older generations in Hungary and Croatia do help each other (demonstrate solidarity), without calling it volunteering. The pandemic has also revealed that spontaneous volunteering is difficult to maintain for a longer period of time. It has

also highlighted the vulnerability of existing volunteer-involving structures (e.g. sports associations, museums).

Third, similar changes in the volunteering infrastructure are taking place throughout Europe, thereby suggesting a broader trend. This new volunteering infrastructure has two components: third-party involvement and spontaneous volunteering. The most visible forms of third-party involvement in Europe are corporate volunteering, service learning and community service. The local, national and international days of service that are becoming well-known throughout Europe constitute an especially important form. Spontaneous volunteering is usually associated with crises (e.g. earthquakes, the arrival of refugees or even the COVID-19 pandemic). Examples of spontaneous volunteering can be observed throughout Europe, thereby providing evidence of the general willingness of people to help humankind. The greatest challenge associated with crisis-driven spontaneous volunteering has to do with the amount of time that people can and will maintain their volunteering. The pandemic once again provides a good example: after some time, the energy starts to wane, and some or most of volunteering will stop. On the other hand, social media and internet-based forms of spontaneous volunteering (which are more likely to be based on campaigns) tend to involve activities that people can do for a longer time.

Conclusions and recommendations

The most important conclusion of this research is that a new volunteering infrastructure is being developed throughout Europe, based on two components: third-party involvement and spontaneous volunteering. Third-party involvement can lead either to the autonomous creation of volunteer opportunities (as observed in multinational CSR programmes) or to an increase in the pressure to create volunteer opportunities (as observed in service learning and community service). Spontaneous volunteering is linked to the growth of technical possibilities for self-organization. As revealed by recent crises (e.g. earthquakes, the arrival of refugees, the COVID-19 pandemic), in many countries, people will start to spontaneously self-organize or join organizations to address urgent issues.

A second conclusion of this study is that the institutional factors that influence volunteer energy are difficult to influence and change. It will thus not be easy to change the current wide variations in volunteer rates in Europe. In some cases, they might even increase. In short, the political outlook for volunteering energy is not favourable in all countries, as some regimes are pushing back on the rights of civil society. The economic outlook is unclear, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some countries might have only had an extremely rough year, while others might be facing prolonged economic setbacks that prevent societies from developing more volunteering opportunities.

In terms of policy (by governments or other third parties), the general advice is to not invest in developing a general culture of volunteering, given the difficulty of changing national-level institutional factors. It would be wiser to invest in the development of more third-party involvement and the creation of more examples of spontaneous, individual volunteering. Likewise, it would be better to help volunteer organizations to investigate what volunteers are willing to give in terms of availability and capability, in order to create effective marketing activities. The goal is to make recruitable, winning volunteer scenarios that are based on the preferences of potential volunteers, and not of organizations.



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