



Policy paper on volunteering

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INTRODUCTION

Objectives of the Paper

The European Youth Forum believes that volunteering and participation in youth organisations lies at the heart of democracy, that it is a dynamic force for social inclusion and active citizenship and the basis for the work of all member organisations of the European Youth Forum. Therefore volunteering must be viewed as a vital dimension of democratic and social life, not merely to be valued for the services it provides or the activities it facilitates. In that context the European Youth Forum committed itself in its work plan for 2003-2004 to developing a clear policy on volunteering, with the goal of promoting an increased participation of young people in youth organisations and enhancing the support for volunteering from all the relevant authorities. This paper builds on the existing work of the YFJ, in particular the proposals outlined in our policy papers on *Guiding Principles on Common Objectives for Voluntary Activities and Greater Understanding of Young People* and *Guiding Principles on Common Objectives for participation and Information*. However, this paper goes further by articulating and promoting our vision for volunteering within participatory organisations, which not only help to create the conditions for better and more volunteering, but which also contribute significantly to active citizenship and help reinforce our democracies in the longer term.

Definition of volunteering and participatory organisations:

Given the rich variety and spectrum of "voluntary activities" across Europe there are many interpretations of what volunteering is and entails. The Youth Forum believes that an activity can only be defined as volunteering when it meets the following criteria:

- it is an activity undertaken of a person's own free will and involves the commitment of time and energy to actions of benefit to others and to society as a whole;
- the activity is unpaid but can include reimbursement of expenses directly related to the voluntary activity;
- it is for a non-profit cause and is primarily undertaken within a non-governmental organisation and therefore cannot be motivated by material or financial gain;
- volunteering should not be used to substitute or replace paid employment.

We welcome the efforts of the Commission to classify the different voluntary activities outlined in the recent European Commission paper ¹. This classification

¹ **Voluntary activities** are all kinds of voluntary engagement. They are characterized by the following additional aspects: open to all, unpaid, undertaken by own free will, educational (non-formal learning aspect) and added social value.

Voluntary service is part of voluntary activities and is characterised by the following additional aspects: fixed period, clear objectives, contents, tasks, structure and framework; appropriate support and legal and social protection.

Civil service is a voluntary service managed by the State - or on behalf of the State- e.g. in the social field or in civil protection.

serves to highlight the distinct differences between activities which at times are interpreted as being the same when they are not.

Participatory organisations are organisations where the members, activists and volunteers carrying out the work or engaged in activities on behalf of the organisation have access to and can also be involved in the democratic decision making processes and have the capacity to decide on the direction and actions of the organisation through its internal democracy mechanisms.

Context: Recent Developments

There have been a number of political developments in the area of volunteering and youth participation at European level.

These include the publication by the Commission, in April 2003 and April 2004, of the Commission's key objectives in the area of youth participation and volunteer activities as part of the open method of co-ordination in youth policy. The Council of Ministers has also recently adopted a Directive on the Entry of Third Country Nationals for the purposes of volunteering. This gives volunteers from third countries coming to the EU certain legal protection.

Public authorities are not always aware of the value that youth associations and NGOs add to participatory democracy and often promote service-providing organisations where volunteers execute, instead of participatory youth organisations led by volunteers themselves.

The European Youth Forum considers civilian service, in the form implemented in many European states (replacing obligatory military service), to be non-voluntary.

I: The Importance, Relevance and Value of Volunteering for Society

Individuals

Volunteering gives young people the opportunity to acquire social values, to strengthen their individual skills and gain experience and skills, which are not usually provided within the formal education or vocational training sector. The European Youth Forum believes that volunteers should be given the opportunity to gain recognition for the knowledge, skills and attitudes they develop through volunteering and participation. This practically demonstrates the significant personal development value of volunteering and participation. It should be open to all regardless of their academic or socio-economic background and can play an important role in the process of social inclusion.

However, as we have already outlined, there are different types of activities which meet some of the criteria stated above. Civil Service does allow young people to contribute to society. However, in many instances, the young person is not involved in decision making or has no choice in the work she/he does. Therefore, such activities are less likely to contribute to the development of active citizens in

Civilian service is an alternative to compulsory military service in some countries, but not voluntary.'

the longer term. In contrast, young people involved in youth organisations are not only making a positive contribution through their work, but by being actively engaged in decision making and by being given space to develop their own projects, they are also learning important skills – which helps them to become responsible, critical and committed citizens in the longer term.

Society

Volunteering is not only of great value to the individual and to our democracies, it makes an incalculable contribution to the economic, social, cultural and environmental well being of our societies. Volunteering is an expression of the individuals' involvement in their communities. Giving one's time for the benefit of others strengthens the fabric of our societies and is therefore a key source of social capital.

Youth participation should not and cannot be measured by counting the number of volunteers but should take into account the number of people committed to the organisation and the extent to which members can participate in the decision making process. When volunteering takes place by being member of a participatory youth organisation, this allows young people not only to work with others in their community and to experience the value of working for others and for the community as a whole, but it also helps to counteract the trend towards growing individualism and consumerism and helps to build up social cohesion and social networks. The promotion of participation in community life is a way to reinforce democracy and to create social capital.

II: THE SPECTRUM OF VOLUNTEERING

Within our definition of volunteering, there is a wide spectrum of different types and forms. We have to bear in mind that there are different kinds of organisations and different types of personal engagement. Although numerous kinds of non-profit organisations provide and organise volunteering opportunities, a distinction has to be made. There are those organisations where volunteers not only undertake tasks and actions or carry out a volunteer service but also have the opportunity to play an active part in the organisation's decision making processes (the participatory organisations) and those organisations which offer opportunities for volunteering in the social sector but do not allow for volunteers to influence the organisation itself or to have an input in the decision-making processes (service-providing organisations). The young volunteers in both types of organisations are making an enormous contribution to the well being of others and to society as a whole. However, those volunteers active in participatory organisations are gaining additional skills and experience which enhance now and into the future their capacity to act as active and engaged citizens, which in turn will reinforce our democracies.

The European Youth Forum supports participatory organisations where the volunteer has access to all decision-making levels within the organisation and a high level of influence over what they do and how they do it. Often when public administrations decide to promote volunteering, they develop policies and proposals that notably weaken youth participatory associations and promote instead other concepts of volunteering, such as institutional volunteering bodies whose aim is to provide services and where the volunteers have little power to plan

or control the activities. The European Youth Forum believes that public authorities should not mix up the establishment of formal and artificial state structures or systems to organise volunteering with the promotion of youth participation and active citizenship. To achieve this objective of improving citizens' involvement in public life, they should create the conditions for the development and promotion of participation and volunteering by giving political, legal, financial and administrative support to participatory youth organizations.

The EU Council Resolution on Youth Participation stresses the need to 'encourage participation by young people in the exercise of active citizenship', to 'involve young people in decision-making' and to 'support the work of youth associations and different forms of active participation in civil society'. Participation is seen as a prerequisite for 'socially cohesive communities'. The Youth Forum in its policy paper on 'Life-wide learning for Active Citizenship' recognises that the best way to promote active citizenship among young people is by encouraging their active participation in youth activities. Through their participation in such activities, young people learn skills such as communication and interpersonal skills, conflict resolution, leadership, management, planning, teamwork and problem-solving skills. The Youth Forum believes that young people should be given every opportunity to be pro-active in order to maximise the learning potential of such activities.

III: YFJ RECOMMENDATIONS

The Youth Forum believes that three inherent values that should be present in all voluntary activities in order to strengthen democracy and involve citizens in the construction of a European society;

1) All young people should have the opportunity to volunteer.

All young people should have the opportunity to volunteer regardless of their economic or social status, gender, disability, race, religious belief, sexual orientation etc.

- Therefore, both public authorities and all organisations providing volunteering opportunities must ensure policies and measures are put in place to encourage volunteering by all young people.
- Public authorities should ensure that young people are provided with the necessary financial and administrative support to engage in volunteering.
- In particular, public authorities should work with all relevant actors (youth organisations, youth workers and young people with fewer opportunities) in order to identify and tackle the obstacles that prevent young people with fewer opportunities to volunteer.

Poor living conditions of young people are a barrier to volunteering. Therefore, public authorities must ensure that everyone has the social, educational, cultural and economic means to be able to participate and exercise their full political rights.

2) Conditions for participation and volunteering should be created.

The European Youth Forum believes that public authorities should not establish bureaucratic, formal and artificial state structures or systems to organise volunteering. In particular, we are opposed to the bureaucratisation of volunteering, where heavy administrative and form-filling procedures are introduced and volunteer programmes become 'highly structured' and where volunteering becomes a commodity. Instead they should create the conditions for the development and promotion of volunteering within its normal sphere i.e. non-governmental organisations with the necessary political, legal, financial and administrative support.

- Therefore public authorities should minimize the bureaucratic and financial problems that participatory organisations face, and reinforce the means they have for taking action. Also, policies that ensure that they receive special attention and protection from public institutions should also be developed and implemented.
- They should also develop and implement policies to enhance volunteering opportunities and to remove legal or other barriers to participation by young people. Special attention should be paid to barriers arising from visa and immigration policies as well as from social and employment legislation.
- Youth organisations should be able to participate in the development of policies enhancing volunteering activities. Co-management and consultation systems ensuring meaningful participation of youth NGOs should be implemented by public authorities.
- The European Youth Forum demands that public authorities take cross-sectorial action to remove obstacles to volunteering, e.g. public authorities responsible for employment, social security, home and foreign affairs should work together to fight these barriers.

3) The promotion of volunteering should be linked to the promotion of participatory youth organisations.

Organisations

Public authorities should recognise the role of participatory youth organisations in supporting not only individual development and social solidarity but also their key role in promoting civic participation among young people. The Youth Programme has led to the creation of new organisations run by professionals to 'manage' the funds. These organisations are not promoting a true participatory model. If we want to build a society in which people participate, we have to promote associations where young people are able to become fully involved. Also, we believe participation is the key to the quality of the volunteering experience. Young volunteers learn more if they have the opportunity to take more responsibility. Young volunteers will also enjoy the activity more and identify to a higher degree with their organisation.

Public authorities should provide the necessary resources and political and administrative support to existing initiatives for the recognition of volunteering or develop new initiatives in partnership and co-operation with youth NGOs.

The recognition of voluntary activities should be developed from the viewpoint of young people engaged in youth organisations. Youth NGOs should have the

ownership of programmes in favour of the recognition of the benefits of volunteering.

Funding

Public authorities should prioritise funding and resources for participatory organisations and develop and implement policies which support these organisations and allow them to engage actively in decision making. The Youth Forum is against the principle of degressivity for the funding of youth organisations. An organisation that has been established for some years still needs funding to insure the appropriate support structures for its volunteers and to allow it to continue to promote capacity building. The principle of degressivity fails to take into account the fact that while youth organisations remain, there is a high turnover in the young people who run them. When new people take over the organisation, it is as if the organisation was just born and thus funding is needed for the training of these new volunteers.

Public authorities should fully respect the independence and autonomy of youth organisations as well as principles of good governance when processing grant applications and paying the grants.