



OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Volunteers – Citizens building the future of Europe

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[own-initiative opinion]

SOC/688

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 EESC notes that in the debate on the future of Europe policy-makers must be aware that Europe's future will be shaped not only by politicians and institutions, including civil society organisations, but also by millions of citizens – volunteers who spend their time and energy every day acting in solidarity for the common good within and outside civil society organisations.
- 1.2 Volunteering involves millions of citizens in the European Union acting, out of solidarity for others, individually or within organised structures (both informal and formal). This movement requires systematic and thoughtful support, at both EU and Member State level, because its impact on social development is many times greater than the potential cost. The EESC would like to see positive qualitative changes in this support in the coming years that better reflect the value of volunteers for the future of Europe.
- 1.3 The EESC calls on the European Commission to take action to declare 2025 the European Year of Volunteers, considering that this would be:
- a way of paying tribute to the millions of volunteers who have demonstrated their significant social role, especially in recent months through their work to combat the effects of the pandemic;
 - a way of further promoting the idea of volunteering in the societies of the Member States, encouraging more people to volunteer and showing that this is an inclusive, universal activity that involves people from all groups and backgrounds regardless of their age and place in society;
 - an opportunity to exchange experiences and know-how between the authorities of the Member States on legal and political instruments to support the activities of volunteers;
 - inspiration for the European Commission to expand and create new programmes addressing volunteers of all ages;
 - a way to promote understanding of critical projects for the future of Europe and its citizens, providing objective data and facts and combating fake and biased information.
- 1.4 The activity of volunteers has real economic value (amounting in many countries to more than 2% of GDP); in many social spheres volunteers are necessary to ensure the basic needs of citizens, including their safety; volunteers play a crucial role in implementing all the UN Sustainable Development Goals; and volunteers are present in every social and age group. The EESC therefore thinks it is unreasonable to limit EU-level and EU-funded volunteer support programmes to just young people.
- 1.5 Following an opinion adopted in 2013¹, the EESC once again calls on the European Commission to take decisive action to draw up detailed rules allowing for comparable data collection on volunteering activity from all the Member States, stressing that without reliable data it is impossible to pursue an effective policy in any field.

¹ [ECO/343 – Statistical tools for measuring volunteering.](#)

2. The concept of volunteering

- 2.1 There is no official EU definition of the term "volunteering", but it is generally understood to embrace all forms of voluntary activity, formal or informal, undertaken by a person by their own choice and without concern for financial gain, and which contributes to the common good.
- 2.2 The definition of volunteer work published in 2011 by the International Labour Organization in its *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work* is consistent with the common understanding of volunteering. According to this definition, volunteer work is "unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside their own household"². This definition may be used in international comparative research for measuring formal volunteering (often described as indirect volunteer work) and informal volunteering (called "direct volunteer work" by the ILO³) in various cultural and legal systems. The EESC points out that the *Resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization* adopted by the 19th ILO International Conference of Labour Statisticians in October 2013⁴ (which includes a new definition of labour that distinguishes between paid and non-paid labour, and changes to the gathering of labour-related data) should improve the capacity to measure volunteering as separate from other forms of non-paid labour such as care for people in one's own household.
- 2.3 Analyses of volunteering are very often based on a distinction between formal and informal volunteering. Formal volunteering, comprising activities within an organisational context, involves people engaging through organised (structured) bodies like NGOs, clubs or public institutions. Informal volunteering refers to unpaid help given by individuals to other people from outside their own households or close family but not in the context of a formal organisation. The EESC regrets that informal volunteering is often not recognised as volunteering by people who offer their assistance, by the beneficiaries of their actions or by the legal frameworks for volunteering in some of the EU Member States. This is one of the reasons why the role of volunteers is currently underestimated.
- 2.4 Volunteering may take place episodically, in relation to an event or disaster relief, e.g. following a fire or flood. Volunteering can also represent a more ongoing commitment. It may be in "people-related" sectors, e.g. in social services, health, education, sport, etc., or may concern environmental and infrastructure projects such as protection and restoration of natural resources or maintaining public gardens. Episodic volunteering can also happen in these contexts, but these sectors are underpinned by more regular volunteers.
- 2.5 The EESC stresses that legal frameworks for volunteering in Europe should be supportive and conducive to quality volunteering, and should not create unnecessary barriers to volunteering. Requirements such as volunteer insurance, volunteer agreements and criminal record checks should be carefully implemented, with quality and access as the driving principles.

² [ILO Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work.](#)

³ [Indicator Description: Volunteer Work. ILO.](#)

⁴ [ILO International Conference of Labour Statisticians Resolution.](#)

- 2.6 In its 2013 opinion the EESC pointed out: "On the basis of the data on volunteering currently available, it is not possible to carry out the analysis called for in the documents of the EC, the Parliament, the European Council or the EESC. At present, it is impossible to monitor reliably the economic importance of volunteering or its contribution to EU-level policies. It is not possible to determine the total amount of time devoted to volunteering or its monetary value, and thus to assess how extensive it is in terms of universal economic indicators such as national employment (the number of people working in the national economy) or GDP". The EESC has also called for preparatory work, which based on the ILO framework proposal should lead to the framing of detailed rules for conducting research in the EU. The EESC regrets that no progress has been made since in establishing a common system for measuring the value of volunteering in Europe. The Committee therefore again calls on the European Commission to act decisively to implement the EESC recommendations, stressing that without reliable data it is impossible to pursue an effective policy in any field.
- 2.6.1 The EESC underlines that better data collection, going beyond GDP and economic value to also look at for example time dedicated by volunteers, their age, gender, areas of activity and added value to society more generally, such as health and well-being, quality of life and social cohesion indicators, would be of all-round benefit.
- 2.6.2 Only a few national statistical institutes have initiated and conducted research into voluntary work based on the ILO methodology, and Poland is the only country whose national statistical institute has already conducted such research twice, in 2011 and 2016, with a further study scheduled for early 2022. The 2011 study calculated the value of volunteer work at about 2.8% of GDP⁵, the 2016 study at around 1.2% of GDP⁶. This wide discrepancy resulted from certain changes in methodology. One of these was the fact that while in 2011 the questions included voluntary activity undertaken by the respondent for the benefit of family members, but living in another household, in 2016 such activity was not taken into account. Another was that the questions in 2011 concerned activity throughout the whole of 2010, whereas in 2016 only volunteering that had been undertaken during the 4-week period in the first quarter immediately preceding the survey was taken into account. This example clearly shows that it is not possible to obtain comparable data without developing a common methodology at EU level initiated by Eurostat.
- 2.7 Volunteering has a value for individuals, communities, the environment, the economy and society at large as one of the most visible expressions of solidarity. It promotes and facilitates social inclusion, builds social capital and has a transformative effect on society. The development of a thriving civil society with engaged volunteers can offer creative and innovative solutions to common challenges. Volunteering contributes to economic growth, and as such deserves specific and targeted measurement in terms of both economic and social capital. It also plays an ever-increasing role in environmental protection and is a crucial source of learning for many volunteers. With this in mind, public policies, whilst directly targeted at supporting volunteers, should also reflect the need for a supportive infrastructure for

⁵ [Statistics Poland – Volunteering 2011.](#)

⁶ [Statistics Poland – Volunteering 2016.](#)

volunteering with sufficient and suitable funding for support measures such as training and insurance costs.

3. Volunteering activities at EU level

- 3.1 The EESC regrets that after the end of the European Year of Volunteering 2011 (EYV2011), volunteering began to gradually disappear from the European agenda. In official documents it featured only sporadically – during the creation of the EU Aid Volunteers and the European Solidarity Corps, and as a priority theme in the Europe for Citizens Programme.
- 3.2 EESC underlines that only a limited amount of research into volunteering has been carried out in Member States. This has covered various aspects of volunteering (for example the level of participation in volunteering, the demographic profile of people involved and their motivation). It is impossible to use this research for analysis conducted on an EU-wide basis due to the lack of consistency in methodological approaches, including even the scope of the definition of volunteering and differences in research dates. The report carried out in 2010 at the request of the European Commission by the consultancy firm GHK⁷ is still the latest available comprehensive and valuable source of data despite its limitations in terms of data comparability.
- 3.2.1 The GHK report showed that 22-23% of EU citizens aged over 15 were involved in volunteering, defined as an activity undertaken of a person's own free will, primarily within a non-governmental organisation for a non-profit cause.
- 3.2.2 At the same time the report indicated that due to methodological differences, the deviation in results can often be as much as 30 to 40 percentage points.
- 3.3 The ad hoc module *Social/cultural participation and material deprivation*⁸ added in 2015 to the annual Eurostat survey on *Income and Living Conditions* contained a few questions on volunteer activities. Based on data obtained from that survey, it is estimated that about 18.9% of EU citizens were involved in formal volunteering and about 22.5% in informal volunteering, a similar level of EU citizen involvement to that shown in the GHK report.
- 3.4 The Flash Eurobarometer survey "European Youth" published in April 2015⁹ contains the most recent data available on the activity of young EU citizens aged 15-30. The EESC notes that the similarities between the data on young people in this study and the data on all adult EU citizens from other studies clearly show that all age groups are equally involved in volunteering.
- 3.4.1 According to the "European Youth" survey, 25% of young people in the EU have been involved in an organised voluntary activity in the past 12 months, but this proportion varies considerably (from 10% to 42%) between individual countries.

⁷ [GHK report on Volunteering in the European Union, GHK 2010.](#)

⁸ [2015 EU-SILC Module on Social/Culture Participation and Material Deprivation.](#)

⁹ [Flash Eurobarometer 408 – European Youth.](#)

- 3.4.2 The same survey also concludes that: "There are two main areas of focus for voluntary activities undertaken by young people: charity, humanitarian and development aid (44%) and education, training and sport (40%)". These are also the most common voluntary activities of young people in each of the Member States.
- 3.4.3 93% of respondents indicated that they have never volunteered abroad.
- 3.4.4 The new European Solidarity Corps, which now includes volunteering in humanitarian aid situations (previously covered by EU Aid Volunteers) should be of sufficient strength and scope so that it leads to more volunteering by young people, especially in other countries, both inside and outside the programme. The necessary resources should be provided to achieve this objective. The possibility should also be explored of extending the programme to support engagement in volunteering among people over the age of 30, or alternatively additional EU resources should be provided to develop a parallel programme without an age restriction.
- 3.5 In January 2021 the European Commission published its *Green Paper on Ageing*, which highlighted that a large number of older people continue to make an active and valuable contribution to society and the economy, with 20% of 65 to 74-year-olds involved in formal volunteering, and people aged over 75 also remaining engaged as far as their health permits.
- 3.6 In September 2020, the Council of the European Union published final conclusions on "Human Rights, Participation and Well-Being of Older Persons in the Era of Digitalisation"¹⁰, in which among other things it invited the Commission to consider setting up a digital platform on "Participation and volunteering after working life".
- 3.6.1 Such a platform could provide information for older people about engaging in voluntary action in countries other than their own. Also, it could inform local authorities and other actors how to involve older people in volunteering and provide guidance and information to people interested in finding volunteering opportunities suitable for older people across Europe.
- 3.6.2 The EESC strongly supports the setting up of such a platform that would integrate existing platforms and avoid duplication of effort, while underlining that voluntary activity by older people plays an important role both for those supported by their activities and for the volunteers themselves by enabling them to stay active beyond the scope of employment, as it has a substantial positive impact on their mental and physical well-being.
- 3.6.3 The EESC points out that the European Solidarity Corps for young people and the proposed platform to support older volunteers should provide the basis for a more comprehensive and cross-cutting European volunteering policy that fosters solidarity and responsibility for and between people of all ages who are freely contributing to the future of Europe based on solidarity and European values.
- 3.6.4 The EESC recommends that this platform gradually include broader age groups of volunteers and be accompanied by greater efforts to reduce barriers to cross-border volunteering such as

¹⁰ [Council Conclusions, 9 October 2020.](#)

the loss of rights to public benefits and support systems, residency rights, and associated provisions such as access to mobile phone and internet connectivity contracts.

- 3.7 Many volunteers across Europe are engaged in activities that are in line with the European Commission's long-standing EU projects (of critical importance for the future of Europe, for example concerning, vaccination, digitalisation, climate issues, financial reforms, the nuclear debate, labour reforms, etc.). As citizens need to obtain a factual and unbiased understanding of the key proposals by EU institutions before they can support them, the EESC calls on the European Commission to actively support those activities carried out by volunteers that can help win citizens' support for key EU projects, including by reducing the risk of fake and biased information.
- 3.8 The growth of flat-rate and lump-sum financing of projects should enable the contribution of volunteers to be recognised as co-financing for EU grants. However, this is not working well in practice due to the fact that volunteer time contributions cannot generally be included in organisational accounts. In addition, many agencies managing EU grants require that payment receipts be provided for the full amounts of flat-rate and lump-sum payments – something that goes against the intention and spirit of the funding approach as a method of calculation. The EESC reiterates its requests in this regard, set out in opinions adopted in 2006¹¹ and 2013¹², and regrets that these have not yet been fully implemented. The EESC notes that the funding programmes of the Council of Europe do have a mechanism to include volunteer time as co-financing for their grants.
- 3.9 The EESC strongly supports the European Volunteering Capital Competition¹³, launched by the Centre for European Volunteering in 2013 as part of the legacy of EYV2011, which connects local volunteering policies and practices to the European context and European values and policy frameworks. The EESC calls for the initiative to be encouraged and supported by all the EU institutions, but with a particular focus also on the subnational level as a way of bringing citizens closer to EU policy-makers and to demonstrate the EU-level support for solidarity-based activities and active citizens contributing to the future of Europe. The EESC calls on the European Commission to actively support the dissemination of good practices in public policies that support volunteering activities at local level, with particular use of examples from the municipalities that have been candidates and winners in the European Volunteering Capital competition.

4. **Trends in volunteering activity**

- 4.1 The EESC points out that ongoing demographic changes will have an impact on the activity of volunteers in the coming years.

11 [SOC/243 – Voluntary activity: its role in European society and its impact.](#)

12 [ECO/343 – Statistical tools for measuring volunteering.](#)

13 [European Volunteering Capital – CEV.](#)

- 4.1.1 Europe has an ageing population and lower birth rates. This means that there are more skilled volunteers available for longer, but also more elderly people needing the support of volunteers as they live longer. With declining birth rates, however, younger people might not be there to volunteer and more peer-to-peer projects for adult and older volunteers will be needed.
- 4.1.2 Europe has increasingly diverse and shifting populations and more will have to be done to ensure social inclusion. Member States cannot pay for all of this from public finances, and even if they had the funds it is not just about money. A more human and solidarity-based approach is needed for true inclusion. Volunteers acting out of solidarity with one another are required for this. A greater effort is called for to combat loneliness and provide social service support when families are more dispersed across countries and the continent. The EESC believes that public authorities at EU, Member State and local levels should be prepared for this, and that the process must include the creation of favourable conditions for the expansion of voluntary activities.
- 4.1.3 Less tax is being collected in the Member States and public budgets are being reduced, but at the same time there is higher demand for services. Greater inequality and poverty result in greater need in the population, but this contrasts with a reduction in funding for civil society organisations, which could do much – with the support of volunteers – to improve the situation of individual citizens and families. The EESC points out that a better balance must be reached.
- 4.2 The EESC underlines that ongoing changes in lifestyle and in the types of activity that produce social recognition, or the need to develop new skills that may be useful professionally for younger generations, may result in a mismatch between citizens' interest in volunteering and real volunteering opportunities, and that the level of volunteering may therefore decrease, despite high "supply and demand". This phenomenon must be constantly monitored so that in due course there can be adjustments in public policies.
- 4.3 A shift is being widely observed from traditional, regular, long-term volunteering based on planned and longer-term commitments to episodic volunteering. Many volunteers are ready to undertake episodic activity, even for a one-off event, but do not want to take on any long-term personal commitment. This trend is reflected in the growth of "voluntourism", where people travel for the specific purpose of volunteering or take up opportunities to volunteer while on holiday. Great care must be taken to ensure that this kind of volunteering has true societal needs at its heart. Where volunteering could do more harm than good, e.g. in institutional settings with children or other vulnerable people (such as orphanages), it should be prohibited.
- 4.4 Another trend observed in recent years is the emergence of intermediaries such as welfare or educational institutions, religious organisations, family volunteering organisers, local volunteer centres, or employee (corporate) volunteering. These bodies help volunteers find a place of activity, seeking organisations that will directly place volunteers. This provides support for people who are looking for an opportunity to start a voluntary activity. However, there is a risk that the activities of these intermediaries may adversely affect the perception of volunteering in society –especially if their activities become commercialised, for example.

- 4.5 Advances in online capacity and social media are enabling citizens to more easily self-organise for ad hoc volunteering. This also makes all types of volunteering opportunities more immediately accessible to citizens, with online platforms matching supply with demand. The rapid rise of new technologies has allowed new forms of volunteering to expand, such as online volunteering, which is not dependent on specific times and locations and can be done in any place where the volunteer has online access and a device to connect from.
- 4.5.1 However, the EESC points out that care must be taken not to exclude those without online access from volunteering.
- 4.5.2 The EESC emphasises that the legal frameworks for volunteering in the Member States need to keep up with this change and ensure, with respect to data protection for example, that vulnerable people continue to be protected and volunteers are suitably trained, even when volunteering in an informal and ad hoc manner. Policy-makers should not think that there is no need to fund volunteering support and infrastructure organisations when people can self-organise online.
- 4.6 The EESC sees a need for more cross-sectoral co-operation between the social partners in the framework of employee volunteering. To have the greatest impact, employers and employees should partner with civil society organisations that are experts in the field and/or cause that they want to support, rather than try to implement volunteering programmes directly themselves.
- 4.7 The EESC recognises that "voluntourism" is a growing industry in Europe and should be regulated to protect the integrity of volunteering, potential volunteers and local communities.
- 4.8 54% of young people who were respondents in a Eurobarometer survey¹⁴ said that they had not incurred any expenses as part of their voluntary activities, while 28% indicated that they had incurred expenses but have not received any contributions, and 16% had incurred expenses and received contributions to those expenses. These data must be taken into account by the beneficiaries or the coordinators of volunteers' work, so that expenses do not become a barrier limiting the involvement of young people. The EESC underlines the importance of reimbursing even small expenses for volunteers, and expects national and local authorities in the Member States to promote and support this approach without any unfavourable tax implications for the volunteers or organisations concerned.
- 4.9 There are inconsistencies in legal frameworks and legal and safety requirements for volunteers and their beneficiaries across Europe. The EESC stresses that steps should be taken to streamline the system for the safety and benefit of everyone. Civil liability insurance for volunteers should be made available in the insurance market in all countries, and government and/or foundation support should be put in place to cover the costs. Criminal record certificates for those volunteering with children or vulnerable people should be mandatory in every Member State and easily and cheaply accessible for potential volunteers. The EESC calls on all Member States to implement these solutions, and urges the European Commission to promote best practices in this area. Such activities will also foster cross-border volunteering.

¹⁴ [Flash Eurobarometer 408 – European Youth](#).

4.10 The EESC believes that the younger the age at which people can be introduced to volunteering, the more likely it is that they will grow into socially included and engaged adults doing their bit for the future of Europe. Initiatives such as service-learning programmes in schools and family volunteering should be encouraged. If necessary, legal frameworks should be adapted to make it possible for younger people and children to also volunteer. Youth organisations play a very important role in this process and should therefore receive suitable and sufficient support from public authorities.

5. **The role of volunteers in the community**

5.1 There is no doubt that volunteers create substantial economic, environmental and social value. In non-profit organisations volunteers are often essential to ensure effective fulfilment of tasks, being one of the most important resources of these organisations. They are frequently recognised by the outside world as a symbol of those entities' activities. For many, especially young people, volunteering is something special. It is often the first activity in which they are empowered to respond to real social needs and able to quickly see the effects of their actions as engaged citizens, significantly reducing the risk of social exclusion.

5.2 In many cases it is becoming legally more difficult for citizens to organise around issues of common concern and so engage people as volunteers contributing to society without seeking personal gain. The rights of association and public funding and support for civil society organisations should be ensured. The EESC underlines that public funding for civil society organisations contributes greatly not only to their function and role in society but to maintaining their independence and ability to ensure internal democratic processes that allow the wishes of their members to be recognised and represented without outside interference.

5.2.1 A well-functioning civil society is a sign of a healthy democracy and contributes greatly to quality of life and peace and stability. Participatory democracy is complementary to representative democracy and not a threat.

5.2.2 In the case of organisations coordinating the activities of volunteers, public funding allows much greater benefits to be obtained for society, benefits that have real economic value, through a specific leverage mechanism.

5.3 People in Europe are now increasingly likely to commit to short-term volunteering activities, often with a clear personal gain, e.g. volunteering at a festival or concert, rather than making a long-term commitment to address an identified societal need. The EESC would like policy-makers to do more to promote the added value of volunteering as social capital and not simply as a personal opportunity or mechanism for saving on human resource costs. Public authorities must help volunteers and the organisations supporting their activities to better demonstrate their value and impact in order to continue to attract volunteers as citizens are confronted with ever-increasing choice in how they use their free time.

5.4 During the COVID-19 pandemic, many policy-makers and ordinary citizens have been able to see the particular potential and real impact of volunteering – both structured activities, coordinated by a public institution or organisation, and individual ad hoc activities, undertaken

spontaneously based on a wish to help out. The EESC paid tribute to hundreds of thousands of volunteers across Europe who assisted people in need in 2020 due to the pandemic by awarding its Civil Solidarity Prize¹⁵ to organisations and individuals engaged in voluntary activities linked to the impact of COVID-19.

- 5.5 Workers with less regular hours and less stable working lives find it more difficult to make long-term commitments to volunteering. For example, shop workers only told with 24 hours' notice if they need to work find it exceedingly difficult to commit to volunteering. The same also applies, for example, to many on-call workers. The EESC points out that volunteering organisations should be supported by know-how, including good practices, about building extra capacity to deal with this changing availability of potential volunteers and develop new ways of managing volunteers.
- 5.6 Social prescribing¹⁶ is a means of tackling poor health without, or alongside, the prescription of pharmaceutical drugs. Volunteering has become an efficient and increasingly popular part of social prescribing schemes. Research proves that volunteering has a positive impact on mental health and that to participate in volunteering activities in the framework of social prescribing is beneficial. The EESC believes that volunteering as a social prescribing practice should be more widely implemented in Europe as part of the recovery from COVID-19, and its impact carefully monitored. It should be ensured that organisations which offer volunteering placements as part of social prescribing schemes respect ethical principles and adhere to quality guidelines for high-impact, needs-led, value-added, voluntary-based actions.
- 5.7 Bearing in mind the positive effects of the European Year of Volunteering 2011, the great need to create a legal and social framework for the development of volunteering, and the significant changes in the behaviour of volunteers and potential volunteers, the EESC calls on the European Commission to take action to proclaim 2025 the European Year of Volunteers.
- 5.7.1 A European Year of Volunteers would be a fitting tribute to the efforts and impact of all volunteers during the COVID-19 crisis and highlight their impact and importance to the recovery and the future of Europe based on solidarity, respect, equality and shared values.
- 5.7.2 The EESC believes that the package of measures coordinated by the European Commission would provide an impulse for the Member States to comprehensively support voluntary activities, taking into account the proposals put forward by the EESC, and that the issue of activities undertaken by volunteers will be a permanent and not an occasional element of European policy.

¹⁵ [EESC Civil Solidarity Prize](#).

¹⁶ [The Healing Power of Social Prescribing](#) and [Policy Statement on Volunteering & Social Prescribing – CEV 2019](#).

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