Role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted an own-initiative report by Marian **HARKIN** (ALDE, IE) on the role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion.

The report highlights that volunteering is a major force that nurtures civil society and strengthens solidarity – one of the core values of the EU – as well as an essential component in supporting community development programmes. Volunteering has a role to play in underpinning local development initiatives and in facilitating the successful implementation of a number of Community-funded initiatives, such as the LEADER Programme, INTERREG and the PEACE Programme.

The report calls for a **comprehensive pan-European investigation** into the nature, level and internal mechanisms of social participation, including voluntary participation and funding for this purpose. As for the Commission, it is called upon to work towards **putting in place a system for all Community funds** whereby volunteer activity can be recognised as a contribution to co-financed projects and to devise mechanisms whereby voluntary work can be suitably costed.

The parliamentary committee also encourages **companies and other private-sector operators**, as part of their corporate social responsibility strategy, to financially support initiatives promoting and enhancing volunteering. It calls on Member States to fund and support the voluntary sector, thus helping to ensure the transfer of corporate skills and know-how from the private to the public sector and also improving the quality of life at local level by encouraging self help in the resolution of local problems.

The MEPs recommend that all Member States **produce regular NPI** (Non-Profit Institutions) **"satellite accounts"** and include volunteer work in these so that policy makers can take account of NPIs in their policy formulation. They also call on the Commission to consider how volunteering might be included as a special category in the statistical accounts of EUROSTAT. Furthermore, the report emphasises that volunteering and voluntary activity should not take the place of paid work.

The report encourages Member States and local and regional authorities to:

- recognise the **value of volunteering** in promoting social and economic cohesion;
- work in partnership with voluntary organisations to develop **plans and strategies** to recognise, value, support, facilitate and encourage volunteering;
- make real efforts to help voluntary organisations to access sufficient and **sustainable funding** for both administrative purposes and projects, without excessive form-filling, red-tape or bureaucracy;
- support the creation of **volunteer emergency services** in every locality in order to ensure a rapid response to natural disasters and accidents.

In particular, Member States are called on to promote and to facilitate volunteering within all Communities, both real and virtual, such as **family volunteering** or volunteering **in marginalised groups** or groups that might not traditionally volunteer. The report also invites the Commission, Member States and regional and local authorities to promote **volunteering through education** at all levels, including at university, so that learning in volunteering be recognised as an integral part of life long learning.

Among other things, the European Commission is called on to:

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- put in place, alongside Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, **a Plan V** for Valuing, Validating and ensuring the Visibility of Volunteers;
- investigate the creation of a legal basis in Community Law for the exemption of voluntary organisations from **VAT** on purchases and for the exemption of donors from tax on donations for voluntary work purposes;
- strengthen international **volunteer exchange schemes** which could, in certain cases, contribute to achieving Millennium Development Goals;
- review its **visa policy** for third-country participants in recognised EU volunteer programmes with a view to introducing a more liberal visa regime in particular as regards volunteers from countries neighbouring the EU.

The report also calls on relevant local and regional stakeholders, voluntary organisations and the media to provide adequate information to citizens about opportunities to volunteer.

Lastly, MEPs recommend that 2011 be declared the European Year of Volunteering.