Role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion

2007/2149(INI) - 22/04/2008 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted, with 639 votes to 23 with 21, abstentions a resolution on the role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion. The own-initiative report was tabled for consideration in plenary by Marian **HARKIN** (ALDE, IE) on behalf of the Committee on Regional Development.

Parliament notes that the initial findings upon implementation of the UN Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions (NPIs) are that the economic contribution of NPIs is on average 5% of GDP and that, even conservatively estimated, volunteer time accounts for more than one quarter of this figure. It also notes that volunteering is a major force nurturing civil society and strengthening solidarity, as well as an essential component in supporting community development programmes.

Members call for a comprehensive pan-European investigation into the nature, level and internal mechanisms of social participation, including voluntary participation and funding for this purpose. Member States and regional and local authorities are asked to 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, while maintaining the necessary controls on the spending of public money. Member States should establish a sustainable volunteering infrastructure to deal with issues such as core funding for voluntary organisations. 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.

Parliament encourages companies and other private-sector operators, as part of their corporate social responsibility strategy, to give financial support to initiatives promoting and enhancing volunteering. It urges Member States, in the context of corporate volunteering, to provide incentives for the private sector 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 quality of life at local level by encouraging self help in the resolution of local problems.

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. Parliament emphasises that volunteering and voluntary activity should not take the place of paid work.

It encourages Member States and local and regional authorities to:

-support the creation of volunteer emergency services in every locality in order to ensure a rapid response to natural disasters and accidents;

-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;

-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:

-put in place, alongside Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, a Plan V for Valuing, Validating and ensuring the Visibility of Volunteers;

-in view of the review scheduled for 2010 of the VAT provisions relating to public bodies and social exemptions, to consider the strong social arguments for introducing VAT exemptions for voluntary organisations on purchases intended for the accomplishment of their objectives, and also to consider the arguments for exemption, in specific cases, from payment of VAT on goods and services that are donated to voluntary organisations;

-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.

Parliament 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.