Volunteering and voluntary activity in Europe

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on volunteering and voluntary activity in Europe.

It recalled that the severe economic crisis, austerity measures and tax pressures are jeopardising the financial stability of many NGOs, sports bodies and voluntary organisations. Recognising the various forms of volunteering practised in Member States, Members called for a multicultural approach from the Member States, and from the Commission a detailed analysis of national volunteering practices and traditions with a view to **fostering a common European approach.** This would create more opportunities for young people's mobility and employability by allowing them to acquire valuable skills. Parliament encouraged Member States to continue creating an enabling environment for volunteering, by establishing a legal framework where one was still lacking.

Better recognition of skills acquired from volunteering: measures recommended were:

- promoting volunteering, especially among schoolchildren, students and other young people;
- promoting the 'electronic portfolio', which provides a comprehensive picture of individuals' skills, including those acquired during volunteering work, as well as promoting the proposed *'Europass Experience'* document would allow volunteers to describe and record skills;
- strengthening gender parity within the voluntary sector.

Parliament believed that the skills acquired by young people during volunteer work should be included in the **European Skills Passport and Europass**, so that formal and non-formal learning were treated in the same way. Volunteering could also offer young people who have broken off their schooling an inclusive environment and inclusive activities.

Volunteering among both young and elderly people: reiterating its support for the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps initiative, Parliament pointed out that volunteering was becoming increasingly common among both young and elderly people. Such activities enabled them to make a contribution to society and earn recognition and esteem in return.

This also encouraged:

- intercultural learning;
- a **sense of European identity**;
- intergenerational solidarity;
- active ageing; and
- lifelong civic participation.

Parliament stressed that the existence of a broad range of volunteering activities, as well as ease of access to such activities, as regards cost, availability of information and infrastructure, and provision of liability and accident insurance cover, were essential if volunteering is to be promoted among all age groups.

Added value of volunteering: Members considered that volunteering, as an active method of building civil society, could contribute to the development of intercultural dialogue and play a major role in combating prejudice and racism. They called on the Commission and Member States to give due recognition to the key contribution that volunteering is making at this time of serious economic crisis.

European Year of Volunteering (EYV): Parliament deplored the poor results achieved for EYV 2011 because of a lack of financial resources. It called on Member States to ensure the sustainability of the results achieved at national level during EYV 2011.

Member States were asked to:

- take the requisite steps to institutionalise volunteering in a **manner consistent with their national labour laws;**
- set up national coordination websites and search engines that will allow easy and well-structured access to volunteering opportunities;
- provide a stable and sustainable support framework for both national and cross-border volunteering that supports both volunteers and volunteering organisations;
- keep in place the national coordinating bodies set up in connection with EYV 2011;
- set up a single point of contact in the form of a service with responsibility for volunteering policy and for coordination in this area between Commission departments and the various institutions.

Parliament stressed the need for a **centralised EU portal** providing a pan-European platform for coordination in this area, which should include a volunteering best practice database.

Facilitate access to volunteering: Members invited Member States to implement the provisions of Directive 2004/114/EC on the conditions of admission of third-country nationals for purposes of study, pupil exchange, unremunerated training or voluntary service, and to **simplify the procedures for the granting of visas,** or to **abolish them, for those wishing to undertake voluntary activities** as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

National, regional and local authorities were also asked to make **adequate funding** available, streamline administrative procedures and provide tax incentives for volunteers' organisations and networks, in particular small organisations with limited resources. In this connection, Parliament asked for the **concept of grants to associations to be clarified** so that funding for associations was no longer confused with state aid, which could hamper competition in the for-profit sector.

Parliament called on the Commission **to look into the possibility of counting the economic contribution made by voluntary work as matching funding for European projects.**

Member States must also:

- make it compulsory for **volunteers to have proper insurance cover**, in order to protect their health and safety during volunteer work;
- facilitate volunteering through the provision of formal, informal and non-formal training to enhance volunteers' skills and empower them in their work;

- promote the European Voluntary Service in universities and other higher education institutions.

Parliament drew attention to the need for volunteering to be encouraged as part of corporate social responsibility strategies, in keeping with voluntary international standard ISO 26000:2010 on guidance on corporate social responsibility.

More resources for volunteering: Parliament invited the Commission to marshal the necessary resources to set up a **European Volunteering Development Fund**, in order to ensure that appropriate support infrastructure is put in place. It emphasised the need to make it easier for NGOs to gain access to European funding, in particular under the ESF, at national and European level.

Lastly, it called the Commission to **recognise volunteer time as eligible in-kind cofinancing for all European grants.**