



EUROPEAN VOLUNTEER CENTRE

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CHAPTER



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VOLUNTEERING  
INFRASTRUCTURE  
IN EUROPE

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# 1. VOLUNTEERING INFRASTRUCTURE

## CONCEPT DEFINITION

Volunteering and volunteerism are rather new social phenomena in Greek public discourse. They arose during the “global associational revolution” of the 1980s and the spread of civil society’s ideas and ideals. Before, volunteering was a practice, almost exclusively, of the Orthodox Church and traditional organisations like the Red Cross and the Scouts.

Historically, forms of intervention in the public sphere were orientated and limited through politics and by traditional forms of active citizenship (elected representatives, political party membership etc). On the other hand, solidarity was based mainly on family and kinship, and less on community. The Orthodox Church and Government’s role was subsidiary in the social protection sector. These factors left no space for the development of civil society institutions and consequently, volunteering. As an outcome of this tradition, Greek society has been generally very sceptical about volunteering, as there were strong beliefs that it was ‘an indirect way for the demolition of the welfare state’ and the replacement of paid employment by volunteers. In the last few years, a shift in public opinion and volunteering is being detected, as people are re-evaluating it in more positive terms.

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The Olympic Games held in 2004 were a highlight of the Government’s active involvement in projects based on volunteering.

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Although there are some regulations coming from Government departments, there is no general law on volunteering. Furthermore, there are no specific and clear bodies of law concerning non-profit, voluntary organisations and relevant notions well known in literature. Different government departments have their own perceptions about non-profit sector related terms. Until recently, legislation and developmental strategies were a low priority for policy makers.

The significant growth of the sector during the 1990s was the main source of attracting and spreading volunteering ideals through Greek society. At the end of the century, government actors started to implement some projects based on volunteering. The Olympic Games of 2004 were a highlight of the Government’s active involvement. Later, large for-profit companies started to implement limited-scale volunteering projects, using their staff in specific areas, mainly ecology. The Orthodox Church encourages volunteerism, but its main form of action is charity, and less giving in the form of volunteering. Today the non-profit sector, as well as informal initiatives, is the main source of volunteering.

Volunteering infrastructure in Greece refers to the potential of volunteering development on the local, national or international level. It is constituted and defined by the level, quantity and quality of relevant information and knowledge, the existence and the functionality of policy directives and the willingness and experience of different stakeholders to promote volunteering in a specific human environment.



## 2. VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE

There is no formal, legal or widely accepted definition of volunteering. Private organisations or government departments use various definitions. The “deontological” definitions refer to common perceptions worldwide and include components like “*unselfish actions aimed to benefit others*”, “*unpaid work for social purposes motivated by altruistic instincts or ideals*” etc. A more practical and “ontological” definition used by the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity and the Federation of Non-profit and Voluntary Organisations is:

*“Volunteering is organised or otherwise, non-compulsory work, offered without compensation. It is provided through government, market, non profit, or informal sectors; it benefits other individuals, groups, communities or society as a whole, excluding relatives, friends or other social networks in which a person participates and is being benefited”* (Zannis, 2004)<sup>1</sup>.

A Special Eurobarometer<sup>2</sup> reported that only 14% of Greeks currently undertake some voluntary activity on a regular or occasional basis, with identical proportions of men and women.

Analysing some evidence on the social care sector in 2005, 1.7 million hours of volunteering, equivalent to 830 full-time employees, were offered to 350 non-profit organisations<sup>3</sup>. But this is the only official scientific research in Greece and it does not include all the organisations in the field.

Furthermore, there is no systematic registration or research concerning the number of non-profit and voluntary organisations. Different estimations from 1990 to 2005 list 5000 to 13,000 non-profit organisations in all fields of activity. According to the author’s estimations, before the beginning of the economic crisis there were 5000 to 7000 active non-profit organisations all over country. Volunteers were a significant percentage of their staff. Many of these organisations face survival problems, and they are not currently active because of the crisis. Middle-class people were the main deposit of volunteering and non-profits now face serious economic difficulties with negative consequences to non-profits’ viability. Private funding is also becoming scarcer. As volunteerism through formal organisations declines, new informal practices arise to face the rapid impoverishment of Greek society, especially in big cities. Initiatives like collective kitchens, shelter provision to the homeless, distribution of blankets and other goods to the poor are the new forms of informal volunteering.

There is no legislation that permits individuals to offer voluntary services through government sector agencies. National and local authorities prefer to use non-profit services for the implementation of specific projects. In general, state agencies use volunteers informally and occasionally. This is all profoundly being transformed because of the rapid impoverishment of Greek society and the abnormal and violent transformation of its social structure.

1. Zannis, P. (2004), “Volunteer and Volunteering: Deontological and Ontological Approaches”, *Social Science Review- Greece*, Vol 19, 75, p.p. 167- 178

2. Directorate for relations with citizens (2011), *Voluntary work. Summary*, European Parliament Special Eurobarometer 75.2

3. Greek Secretary of social solidarity (2006), *The Non-profit Sector in Social Care (in Greece)*, unpublished report



### 3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR VOLUNTEERING AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

There is no legal framework on volunteering. Current legislation concerns only non-profit and non-governmental entities, and is not systematic and often contradictory. Different rules and regulations that govern relations between the state and third sector do not emphasise volunteering.

### 4. STRUCTURE OF THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR INVOLVED IN VOLUNTEERING

Over the last 15 years, there have been various initiatives by government and non-profit organisations to promote volunteering, but these efforts have been limited and stillborn.

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**Financial support to volunteering organisations is almost exclusively due to EU funded projects and private philanthropy.**

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The General Secretary for Youth, as the official coordinator of European Year of Volunteering 2011 in Greece, made some efforts to support and promote volunteering<sup>4</sup>. Former initiatives came from the governmental organisation “Citizens in Deed”, the Federation of Non-profit and Voluntary Organisations and the Initiative for the Legislation of Civil Society in the Constitution. The latest collective initiative came from Civil Society Parliament of Greece, an innovative institution for the development of civil society in Greece.

### 5. OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Private Foundations and for-profit organisations, in a corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework, provide resources to non-profit organisations, mainly by the form of economic support and less in giving time.

### 6. FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

The Greek Government does not fund organisations in order to encourage volunteering. Funds are provided on a “contract state” basis, for specific missions, especially for social care and environment projects. A number of public initiatives to promote volunteering in the past have not been successful. Economic support is almost exclusively indirect, through European Union funded projects and private philanthropy.

4. General Secretary for Youth (2012), <http://www.neagenia.gr/frontoffice/portal.asp?cpage=NODE&cnode=1>

## 7. REGULAR AND SYSTEMATIC RESEARCH

There is no systematic scientific research either by government departments or Universities, who have still not paid much attention to volunteering and third sector studies and research. There is therefore no general data about the number of volunteers, non-profit organisations or other information like total amount of hours offered, gender or other statistics.

Consequently, we have little and unrepresentative data in Greece, except for some evidence in specific sub sectors. For example, there is evidence that volunteering resources are richer in environment protection, social care, and culture/recreation sub sectors.

## 8. ETHICS AND QUALITY STANDARDS FOR VOLUNTEERING

There are no specific standards or principles on volunteering widely accepted by the government or the non-profit sector.

## 9. AWARENESS OF VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

Some initiatives like a “bank of volunteering time” in the past were not successful. Volunteers by themselves usually make contact with organisations, according to their interests. The media provide free advertising time to promote voluntary organisations without putting emphasis on the promotion of voluntary work.

## 10. ADDITIONAL COUNTRY SPECIFICITIES

The latest initiative mentioned above, the *Civil Society’s Parliament of Greece*, is a new independent institution which aims to promote social solidarity, volunteering, social cohesion, empowerment of civil society and non-profit organisations. Its declaration was signed by 135 non-profit organisations from all over the country in December 2009. According to the timeline set, it should have started operating. But the economic crisis and lack of any support from the government have resulted in delays to the beginning of the institution’s proceedings<sup>5</sup>.

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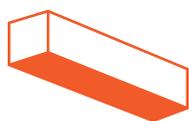
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5. Civil Society Parliament of Greece (2011), [www.koinoniamko.gr](http://www.koinoniamko.gr)

# 11. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Greek Government's attempts to promote volunteering in the past 15 years have proved insufficient. Likewise, civil society organisations do not have the means, in general, to support and promote volunteering on a large scale. Efficient strategies may come from horizontal civil society networks and not by authorities in Greece. Volunteering should not be defined strictly on an individual level, but in a larger framework, as a collective movement for social transformation. Volunteering, social justice, solidarity, democracy, and active citizenship should not be seen separately, but as components of a larger vision, aiming to build a real civil society.



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## Resources

Civil Society Parliament of Greece, 2011, [www.koinoniamko.gr](http://www.koinoniamko.gr)

Directorate for relations with citizens, 2011, *Voluntary work. Summary, European Parliament Special Eurobarometer 75.2*

General Secretary for Youth, 2012, <http://www.neagenia.gr/frontoffice/portal.asp?cpage=NODE&cnode=1>

Greek Secretary of social solidarity, 2006, *The Non-profit Sector in Social Care (in Greece), unpublished report*

Zannis, P., 2004. *Volunteer and Volunteering: Deontological and Ontological Approaches*, *Social Science Review- Greece, Vol 19, 75, p.p. 167- 178*