

This report was compiled by Ross Gower, Turing Scheme trainee at the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) from the University of East Anglia (UEA). The report is based on information gathered from online research. This is a preliminary study to gather information about different economic barriers faced by potential volunteers, and to suggest changes in EU policy to reduce these factors.

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# Minimising Economic Barriers to Volunteering

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## Introduction

Volunteering is a great asset, both for the individuals that participate in it and for wider society. However, there are barriers to people being able to volunteer, thus preventing these benefits from being fully realised. One of these barriers are economic ones, which will be the focus of this report. This report will analyse the economic barrier problem; why this is a problem that needs fixing and policy solutions that should be implemented by both European policy makers and organisations in order to minimise these economic barriers.

## The Economic Barrier Problem

Multiple studies have found that economic status is a significant barrier to volunteering<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>. This link between economic status and volunteering has been identified in the US, the UK, and across Europe<sup>5</sup>. One of the studies identified economic status as one of the biggest barriers to volunteering<sup>6</sup>.

The economic barriers to volunteering mostly affect those with a lower socio-economic status. According to one study, those from a lower socio-economic background are 17% less likely to volunteer than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds<sup>7</sup>.

There are multiple reasons for this. Firstly, many people with lower economic status cannot afford to spend time volunteering<sup>8</sup>. This is because volunteering is unpaid. As such, volunteering for many people from lower socio-economic backgrounds is a luxury that they do not have time for, due to it taking up precious time for them that they need to use to undergo paid work<sup>9</sup>.

Secondly, volunteering can incur certain financial costs. One such financial cost is transportation<sup>10</sup>. Even if someone from a lower socio-economic background is able and willing to take on a period of unpaid work, they may not be able to cover some of the financial costs from volunteering such as paying for transportation if they are not being reimbursed<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> K. Southby, J. South and A. Bagnall, 'A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering for Potentially Disadvantaged Groups and Implications for Health Inequalities', VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 30 (2019): 907-920, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11266-019-00119-2#citeas>

<sup>2</sup> K. Southby and J. South, 'Volunteering, Inequalities and Barriers to Volunteering: A Rapid Evidence Review,' Leeds Beckett University, (2016): 1-51, <https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/3434/>

<sup>3</sup> K. Hylton, R. Lawton, W. Watt, H. Wright, and K. Williams, 'Review of Literature, in The ABC of BAME New, Mixed Method Research Into Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups and Their Motivations and Barriers to Volunteering, Leeds Beckett University, (2019): 1-39, <https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/5601/>

<sup>4</sup> R. Sundeen, S. Raskoff, M. Garcia, 'Differences in Perceived Barriers to Volunteering to Formal Organizations: Lack of Time Versus Lack of Interest', Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 17, no.17 (2007): 279-300, <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.150>

<sup>5</sup> Southby, South, 'Volunteering, Inequalities and Barriers,' 36

<sup>6</sup> Southby, South, Bagnall, 'A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering,' 912

<sup>7</sup> Hylton, Lawton, Watt, Wright, Williams, 'Review of Literature,' 14

<sup>8</sup> Southby, South, 'Volunteering, Inequalities and Barriers,' 36

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Sundeen, Raskoff, Garcia, 'Differences in Perceived Barriers,' 284

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

Lastly, a social network is vital to finding volunteering opportunities<sup>12</sup>. People with higher incomes often have a greater stake in society, and as such have more social connections, meaning they know more people who offer volunteering opportunities<sup>13</sup>. People with lower incomes however do not have as great a stake in society, meaning they have less social connections and thus know less people who offer volunteering opportunities<sup>14</sup>.

The evidence shows that the economic barriers to volunteering mostly affect those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. As such, policies that aim to minimise this barrier need to be tailored to helping this group. However, there is evidence that there are barriers to volunteering for people with a higher economic status too.

Those with a higher economic status often have a full-time job in a time-consuming occupation<sup>15</sup>. As such, they often have a lack of free-time, meaning they cannot engage in volunteering<sup>16</sup>. People with a higher economic status should therefore also be considered when making policies to minimise the economic barriers to volunteering.

## Why This is a Problem That Needs Fixing

There are multiple reasons why minimising the economic barriers to volunteering should be given precedence by European policy makers and organisations.

Firstly there are numerous health benefits for people who volunteer. According to one longitudinal study, there is a positive and causal link between volunteering and psychological well-being<sup>17</sup>. According to this study, people who volunteer are more likely to ‘feel good about oneself’, with such feelings being more likely the more people volunteer<sup>18</sup>. The study mentions that volunteering also provides physical health benefits<sup>19</sup>. Considering these health benefits of volunteering, it is important to minimise the barriers to such activities in order for these benefits to be fully realised.

Secondly, volunteering has significant societal benefits. In the UK for instance, volunteering is a vital part of the healthcare system<sup>20</sup>. In the UK, volunteering has been linked to greater self-care and prevention efforts in the community<sup>21</sup>. Since there are economic barriers to volunteering, there are then also economic barriers to these societal benefits. In order to allow these benefits to be fully realised it is vital to minimise these economic barriers.

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<sup>12</sup> Southby, South, Bagnall, ‘A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering,’ 915

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Sundeen, Raskoff, Garcia, ‘Differences in Perceived Barriers,’ 284, 296, 297

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> J. Piliavin and E. Siegl, ‘Health Benefits of Volunteering in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study’, *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 48, no.4 (2007): 450-464, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002214650704800408>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Southby, South, Bagnall, ‘A Rapid Review of Barriers to Volunteering,’ 907

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

Thirdly, these economic barriers threaten the principle of equality of opportunity. Volunteering is linked to long term career success. People who volunteer are more likely to find a job and have higher income growth than non-volunteers<sup>22,23</sup>. This is because volunteering leads to people gaining job-related skills that are conducive to their professional career such as leadership, critical thinking and interpersonal skills<sup>24</sup>. As such, volunteering leads to people being more likely to increase their material circumstances. Since there are economic barriers to volunteering however, not everyone has the same opportunity to boost their material circumstances via salary increases and promotions at work. This means that economic barriers to volunteering subsequently serve as a barrier to the principle of equality of opportunity. This also suggests that economic barriers to volunteering also result in increasing inequality, since people from lower socio-economic backgrounds have less of a chance to volunteer and thus succeed in their job, while people from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be able to volunteer and thus boost their material circumstances.

Lastly, the economic barriers to volunteering threaten the EU's goal of integration. A key aspect of the EU throughout its history has been the integration of its member states into common systems<sup>25</sup>. Volunteering across the continent assists this goal, since it is an activity that brings people together from a variety of backgrounds to work on a common goal. Since there are economic barriers to volunteering, there are also economic barriers to EU integration. In order to better meet the EU's goal of integration, it is therefore necessary to minimise these economic barriers to volunteering.

Overall, this shows the importance of minimising the economic barriers to volunteering. Volunteering creates numerous benefits to both participants, wider society and political projects. The economic barriers to volunteering therefore serve as a barrier to these benefits. As such, minimising the economic barriers to volunteering should be given precedence by European policy makers and organisations.

## Policy Solutions

### Policy 1 - More Formal Support from Employers

Formal support from employers has a significant effect on whether people can volunteer and for how long. People who receive formal support from their employer are significantly more likely to volunteer and can volunteer for longer<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> A. Profiroiu, M. Pacesila, 'Volunteering: a Route to the Students Professional Development', *Administratie si Management Public*, 29 (2017): 91-107  
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/e868970950f34cfc0de5a75ed90058e/1?pg-origsite=gscholar&cbl=986350>

<sup>23</sup> A. Shantz, R. Banerjee, D. Lamb, 'The Relationship Between Male and Female Youth Volunteering and Extrinsic Career Success: A Growth Curve Modeling Approach', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 48 (2019): 201-225, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0899764018807093>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 203

<sup>25</sup> UK In A Changing Europe, 'What is European Integration', (2020),  
<https://ukandeu.ac.uk/the-facts/what-is-european-integration/>

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

There are multiple forms of formal support that employers can give. One of the most effective types of formal support is reduction of work hours and work activities. This type of formal support is shown to have a very strong association with a higher number of volunteer hours<sup>27</sup>. Another type of formal support is employers making donations to organisations that employees volunteer for based on the amount of hours that they volunteered. This has also been shown to encourage employees to volunteer more<sup>28</sup>.

Both of these forms of formal support from employers could help minimise the economic barriers to volunteering. As mentioned before, a key barrier to volunteering for low-income people is that they cannot afford to spend time doing unpaid work. As such, employers offering employees who volunteer a reduction in work hours and work activities while still being paid the same wage could be a way to overcome this barrier. It would give them more time to be able to engage in volunteering activities without seeing a reduction in income. Lower income people may also volunteer less due to feeling like they cannot offer much to the organisations that they volunteer for financially. As such, employers offering donations to organisations that employees volunteer for may encourage more lower income people to volunteer, since they will feel like they can offer more financially to organisations.

As such, in order to minimise the economic barriers to volunteering, this report recommends that employers adopt a policy of offering formal support, such as those listed above, to employees who wish to volunteer. Employers should do this for two reasons. Firstly, volunteering creates a lot of benefits for both individual participants and the wider community, so the offering of formal support for volunteers would be a way for employers to have healthier and happier employees and as a way to give back to the community. Secondly, it is in the employer's own self-interest to offer this support, since individuals learn new skills from volunteering, so encouraging employees to participate in such activities would be a good way to create a more-skilled workforce.

Policymakers should also encourage employers to offer such formal support. For instance, policymakers could offer tax breaks for businesses that offer such formal support, such as tax cuts. This would make it more financially viable for employers to offer this support to employees that volunteer. Policymakers in the future could also go further by mandating employers to offer support to employees that volunteer up to a certain number of hours a year.

## **Policy 2 - More Flexible and Individual Based Non-Profit Organisations**

As previously mentioned, economic barriers to volunteering can take different forms for different people. People who have lower incomes can be prevented from volunteering due to not being able to afford to take a period of unpaid work, or cover the costs involved in volunteering such as transport. People who have higher incomes can also be prevented from volunteering due to having long work hours and thus a lack of free time.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

When non-profit organisations take on volunteers, they should be aware of the different needs of people. As such, they should take an individual and flexible approach to taking on volunteers. Rather than having a 'one-size fits all' approach to volunteering, they should communicate with volunteers beforehand to come to an agreement on how best to overcome their individual economic barriers. By talking to someone with a lower income, the non-profit organisation can find out about their cost-based barriers and thus work out ways to help the individual overcome them; for example, by offering reimbursement for travel costs. By talking to someone with a higher income, the non-profit organisation can find out about their time-based barriers, and offer the individual things like shorter and more flexible volunteering hours. By taking this individual and flexible approach to volunteers, organisations can better help potential volunteers overcome certain economic barriers.

### **Policy 3 - Promoting Volunteer Information Fairs**

As mentioned before, a key barrier preventing low income people from volunteering is the fact that they are less likely to have strong social networks, meaning they will have less contacts with people who offer volunteering opportunities.

One way to overcome this economic barrier for low income people is by promoting volunteer information fairs. Such fairs would be a place where organisations who are looking for volunteers come together to advertise themselves, and thus find individuals who wish to get involved. These fairs would be a good way of getting around the need for a strong social network to volunteer, since it would give everyone a place to find volunteering opportunities regardless of their social circle.

Employers can promote such fairs by hosting them in the workplace a certain number of times each year. This would give employees in their workplace the chance to find volunteering activities in a flexible and accessible way.

Policymakers can also promote these fairs by hosting them in public buildings. This would give a place for everyone in the local area to find volunteering opportunities.

By promoting such events, people do not need to have wide social networks to find volunteering activities. This is because these fairs would be available and open to everyone rather than operating in private and exclusive social arenas. This would help minimise the barriers to volunteering, since lower income people generally do not have the such wide social networks that are often needed to find volunteering activities, so through minimising the need for such networks via these fairs, volunteering opportunities become more easily accessible to lower income people.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, economic barriers significantly restrict people's ability to volunteer. Such economic barriers predominantly restrict lower income people's ability to volunteer; many cannot afford to take on a period of unpaid work, many cannot afford some of the costs involved in volunteering and many do not have the dense social networks needed to find volunteering opportunities. As such, policies that seek to address the economic barriers to volunteering need to specifically target lower

income people. However, there are some economic barriers for higher income people too, namely the fact that they often have time-intensive jobs, giving them less time to volunteer. As such, policies should also aim to address the restrictions to volunteering that higher income people face.

This report argues that minimising these economic barriers should be given precedence by European policy makers and organisations. Volunteering creates numerous benefits for both individual participants and wider society. Volunteering increases the psychological wellbeing and physical health of participants, is a vital part of certain sectors such as healthcare, leads to a more skilled workforce and increased job success and helps the EU achieve its goal of integration. In order for the benefits of volunteering to be fully realised, barriers to participation such as economic barriers must be minimised.

This report suggested four main policies that European policy makers and organisations should enact in order to minimise economic barriers. Suggestions included encouraging more formal support from employers such as reducing the work hours of employees who volunteer, and encouraging non-profit organisations that take on volunteers to take a more flexible and individual based approach and promoting volunteer fairs in workplaces and public buildings. By enacting such policies, the economic barriers to volunteering can be minimised and thus the benefits of volunteering can be fully realised.