

Policy Statement on the European Year of Volunteering 2011

Caritas Europa, as network of all the Caritas organisations in Europe warmly welcome and share the importance attributed by the European Union to 'Volunteering', by stressing the added value, both economic and social, of the commitment of millions of people in Europe who contribute to their communities during their spare time. Their efforts and those of the many thousands of volunteering organisations make a difference to society in countless ways. Volunteering is also a paramount constituent factor to the European core values of participatory democracy, solidarity and social cohesion. It is an emancipating and innovative factor in the human and social development of society.

Initiatives organised in the year 2011 will support civil society, local and regional authorities and the Member States to promote recognition and awareness raising on the value of volunteering, to celebrate volunteer efforts, to empower people and volunteer organisations and to create an enabling environment for volunteering including a volunteering infrastructure.

Caritas Europa, while endorsing these general objectives, wants to stress the social dimension of volunteering, highlighting in particular the importance of voluntary commitment in the social field and in active citizenship. Volunteering, in the near neighbourhood but also in third countries, should contribute to the autonomy and social inclusion of people in precarious situations as well as to the development of their communities. For them – as for all volunteers in general - it may provide a source of self esteem and self valorisation as well as a source of joy !

For Caritas itself, volunteering and its message of gratuitous, unselfish and organised commitment to other people is intrinsic to its identity. It reflects the diaconal task of the Christian community and answers to God's commandment to love one another. As an attitude, it motivates our actions, of volunteers and paid staff alike.

Caritas Europa calls upon the European Union as well as upon the Council of Europe to urge European and national policy makers to acknowledge and support the importance of volunteering for a more humane society of solidarity, and to help volunteering further develop and realize its full potential.

- This means first of all **to recognize and make visible** the role of volunteers and their contribution to society.
- It also means that in every country a **legal framework** should exist that provides basic legal recognition of, and legal protection for volunteers, taking into account the specificity of volunteering while avoiding to impose too many restrictions or too much administrative burden that would hinder volunteering instead of promoting it.
- It implies the need to **strengthen support structures that offer training and accompaniment** for volunteers. The quality and added value of volunteering also depend on the quality of the support that volunteers receive.

- Special attention should be given to volunteering initiatives that **empower poor and excluded people** by taking up a role in society –also giving them the opportunity to volunteer on their turn-, as well as to initiatives that introduce **new forms of volunteering** and of **volunteer exchanges** within the European as well as within the global context.
- At the same time though, the European Institutions and national political bodies should remain vigilant that volunteering **should not be instrumentalised** as a form of **cheap labour**, replacing paid work. Neither should it be instrumentalised to **substitute** the duties of governments or local authorities in the areas of health care, social services or social work, or in international cooperation.

Caritas will advocate for the aforementioned demands at European and national level in their discussions with authorities and policy makers. They will do so in collaboration with other likeminded organisations, in particular with Alliance, a group of European networks active in volunteering, of which Caritas is a member.

Caritas Europa and its member organisations will be taking the opportunity of this European Year to highlight and strengthen their own initiatives regarding volunteering in the manifold areas of their work and on the various levels where volunteers are active – be it on local, regional, diocesan, national, European and international level.

Above all, Caritas Europa will seize the opportunity of this European Year to express a heartfelt thank you to all those who, through their commitment in a spirit of gratuitousness, contribute to a better world for so many people who dwell at the margins of society, hence contributing to the realisation of the Civilisation of Love that we believe in and that constitutes the cornerstone of our Caritas vision and mission.

As a conclusion to many initiatives throughout Europe and throughout the whole year 2011, Caritas organisations from all over Europe will meet in Strasbourg from the 2nd to the 5th of December to festively close this year's focus on volunteering, to celebrate the commitment of hundreds of thousands of volunteers, to reiterate the aforementioned demands and bring them once again to the attention of the European Institutions, both from the European Union and the Council of Europe. Caritas all over the world will join in to celebrate the World Day of Volunteering on December 5th.