# Portugal

## VOLUNTEERING INFRASTRUCTURE IN EUROPE

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# 1. VOLUNTEERING INFRASTRUCTURE CONCEPT DEFINITION

VUnder the Portuguese basic legal framework for volunteering (Law no. 71/98, article 4), the organisations legally allowed to recruit and coordinate volunteers are public entities of central, regional or local administration or other legal persons governed by public or private law, as well as socially recognised organisations that meet the conditions to integrate volunteers and coordinate their activities.

This law also mentions that activities involving volunteers must pursue the social and community interest and can be developed in the following domains: civic, social action, health, education, science and culture, patrimony, environmental protection, consumer protection, cooperation for development, employment and vocational training, social reinsertion, civil protection, development of associative life and social economy, promotion of volunteering and social solidarity or others with similar nature. This list is not exhaustive, it contains a certain degree of overlap and is always open to existing domains or to new ones that might emerge.

The Law no. 71 defines volunteering as a set of activities pursuing community or social interest, carried out in an unselfish way by individuals, within the framework of not-for-profit projects, programmes or other interventions developed by public entities or private organisations for the benefit of individuals, families or communities in need.

A volunteer is defined as an individual performing volunteer activities in an organised setting, out of his/her will, in an unselfish and responsible manner, according to his/her qualification and during his/her leisure time.

Volunteering infrastructure is responsible for defining a volunteering programme as the result of the mutual will and responsibility of the volunteer and the organisation. The volunteering relationship is based on 3 principles: the free and responsible adhesion of the volunteer to carry out the volunteering activities, the existence of a relationship between the organisation and the volunteer, and the translation of the principles of volunteering, such as solidarity and complementary responsibility, into practice.

In Portuguese legislation, Volunteer Involving Organisations (VIOs) are referred to as Organizações Promotoras de Voluntariado (OPVs). Registration and accreditation through Portugal Voluntário have been used mainly to access specific public support measures rather than as a general legal requirement to operate as an OPV.

Between 2017, when the National Council for the Promotion of Volunteering was dissolved and its responsibilities were transferred to CASES, and 2026, this process was managed by CASES - Cooperativa António Sérgio para a Economia Social. Following the 2026 institutional reform, these responsibilities were transferred back to the Public Administration.

Currently, the main responsibilities regarding the institutional framework for volunteering have returned to Public Administration, wherein the Directorate-General for employment and Labour Relations (DGERT) coordinates and implements public volunteering policies, while the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP) is responsible for training in the field of volunteering.

## 2. VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE

The Law no. 71 defines volunteering as a set of activities pursuing community or social interest, carried out in an unselfish way by individuals, within the framework of not-for-profit projects, programmes or other interventions developed by public entities or private organisations for the benefit of individuals, families or communities in need. This law does not cover informal and isolated volunteer work.

The principles of volunteering set forth by the law are: solidarity, responsibility, participation, cooperation, complementarity, being without payment, and convergence. In Portugal volunteering is strongly influenced by Christian values and morals. The church was the first institution to supply volunteer assistance inspired by the Christian principle of charity. Over time, State and Church shared social responsibility and supported the establishment and expansion of the institutions supplying social assistance. These institutions maximised the spirit of solidarity and individual participation. The last decade of the XIXth century marked a turning point for volunteering with the institutionalisation of the Social Service. This institutionalisation of social services entailed services previously provided by religious believers and/or volunteers being provided by professionals.

Portugal has one of the lowest volunteering rates in the European Union. According to the most recent comprehensive data published by Eurostat, in 2022 only 7.3% of the Portuguese population aged 16 and over participated in formal volunteering activities, compared to an EU average of 12.3%. This can be linked to the social, economic and political factors that have affected both the supply and demand of volunteers. Various organisations depend in different degrees on the utilisation of volunteers, according to

their main activities and available resources. Thus organisations such as Humanitarian Associations of Firemen and the Red Cross are heavily dependent on volunteers, whereas private institutions of social solidarity rely rather little on volunteers. Smaller entities targeting vulnerable social groups and with little support from the state, are the ones that depend more on the work of volunteers.

However, estimates by the International Labour Organization (ILO) for 2022, published on the UNV Knowledge Portal, suggest that informal volunteering may be considerably more widespread than official surveys indicate. Informal volunteering here means helping neighbours, friends or members of the community directly, without going through an organisation. According to these estimates, around 1.22 million people in Portugal volunteered directly, compared with around 665,000 who volunteered through organisations. These figures are not directly comparable with the national Survey on Volunteer Work (INE, 2018, see Section 7), which used a different methodology and found informal volunteering to be much less common than formal volunteering. This difference shows how much the measured scale of informal volunteering depends on how it is defined and captured.

Regarding the profile of the volunteers in Portugal, the most recent data available, for 2018, show a slightly higher rate of volunteering amongst women (8.1%) than amongst men (7.6%). By age, the group with the highest participation was the 15 to 24 age group (around 11.3%) and by education level, people with higher education qualifications (around 15.1%). Similarly, volunteering rates were higher amongst the unemployed (10.5%) and single people (9.1%). As for older people, he CASES 2026 study reports that the volunteering rate among people aged 65+ fell from 7.3% (2012) to 4.2% (2018).

Overall, the data reveals a volunteering profile characterised by a slightly higher level of participation amongst women, a strong presence of young people, and a positive correlation between educational attainment and volunteering. However, the profile varies considerably depending on the area of volunteering: young people are more prevalent in youth organisations, environmental groups and fire brigades, whilst older people are better represented in social and charitable organisations, such as IPSS (private institutions of solidarity), Caritas and the Holy Houses of Mercy.

Celebratory years, such as the European Year of Volunteering (EYV) 2011 and the International Volunteer Year 2026 (IVY2026) as well as initiatives such as the Portuguese Volunteering Capital, promoted by CPV, have been excellent opportunities to give volunteering even more visibility and to raise the interest of the media on the subject.

# 3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR VOLUNTEERING AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

In 1998 (through Law no 71/98, 3 November) the basic legal framework for volunteering was published, with the aim to promote and ensure the equal participation of all citizens in volunteering. Since some aspects of the framework needed to be detailed and further regulated, almost a year later a law decree was published (law decree no. 389/99, of 30 September).

A working group was established in 2011 to review the existing legislation and proposals for amendments were subsequently developed, including a proposal submitted in 2012.

However, these initiatives did not result in the replacement of the 1998 Volunteering Law, which remains in force. Discussions on its modernisation have continued over the years and, in 2026, the revision of the legal framework has again been placed on the agenda, with civil society organisations advocating for legislation better adapted to contemporary forms and challenges of volunteering. The proposal suggests the possible recognition of informal and/or spontaneous community initiatives, the further protection of volunteering and volunteers and the recognition of the role of volunteering in intergenerational cooperation.

The Law no 71/98 defines the basic legal framework under which volunteering should be developed, recognising its social value as an expression of active citizenship and consequently promoting and ensuring its autonomy and diversity. It establishes the principles of volunteering, namely solidarity, participation, cooperation, complementarity, being payment free, responsibility, and convergence. It includes the definitions of volunteering activity and volunteers, the organisations allowed to recruit and coordinate volunteers, the domains in which volunteering activities can be developed, the rights and duties of volunteers and the relationship between the volunteers and the volunteers involving organisations.

Volunteering is defined as a set of activities pursuing community or social interest carried out in an unselfish way by individuals, within the framework of not-for-profit projects, programmes or other interventions developed by public entities or private organisations for the benefit of individuals, families or communities in need. A volunteer is defined as an individual performing volunteer activities in an organised setting, out of his/her will, in an unselfish and responsible manner, according to

his/her qualification and during his/her leisure time.

This law contributes to the creation of an enabling environment for volunteering as it clearly defines its legal framework and regulates other relevant aspects of carrying out volunteer work. The main responsibility for implementing the provisions of this law lies with the government.

With regard to the institutional framework for volunteering in Portugal, it has evolved considerably over time. Until 1999 there was no formal infrastructure body to support volunteering. Following the adoption of Law No. 71/98, the Conselho Nacional para a Promoção do Voluntariado (CNPV) was established under Decree-Law No. 389/99 of 30 September, which further developed Law No. 71/98. Its main role was to promote, coordinate and strengthen volunteering at national level. However, through Decree-Law No. 39/2017 of 4 April, these responsibilities were transferred to CASES – Cooperativa António Sérgio para a Economia Social, which succeeded the CNPV as the national body responsible for volunteering policies.

More recently, in February 2026, the Portuguese Government decided to withdraw the State's participation in CASES. This decision was formalised through Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 16/2026 of 3 February, which provided for the public functions previously carried out by CASES to be transferred back to the Public Administration. The redistribution of these responsibilities was subsequently established through Decree-Law No. 150/2026 of 28 July. In the field of volunteering, the new model divides responsibilities between different public bodies:

- DGERT - Direção-Geral do Emprego e das Relações de Trabalho, under the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, is responsible for the coordination and implementation of public volunteering policies. This expressly includes the management and issuance of the *Cartão de Identificação do Voluntário* (Volunteer Identification Card), technical support to volunteer-involving organisations, and the organisation of national volunteering campaigns and programmes.
- IEFP - Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional is specifically responsible for training in the field of volunteering. During the transition, it was also entrusted with ensuring continuity in the monitoring of certain forms of financial support previously granted to volunteering organisations, including MAV - *Medida de Apoio ao Voluntariado*.

At the local level, Portugal also has a network of Bancos Locais de Voluntariado (Local Volunteer Banks), which began operating from 2002 onwards. They act as local intermediaries between people wishing to volunteer and organisations seeking

volunteers, while also supporting the promotion and organisation of volunteering at municipal and community level.

It is important to distinguish the Local Volunteer Banks from the national public authorities. They do not replace the national body responsible for volunteering, nor do they form part of a hierarchical administrative structure. Rather, they function as a local infrastructure for brokerage, support and promotion, often linked to municipalities or other local organisations.

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

There is no national volunteer centre in Portugal. Instead, the infrastructure supporting volunteering combines public institutions responsible for volunteering policy, local volunteering structures and civil society networks and organisations.

Following a recommendation of the National Commission for the 2001 International Year of Volunteers, in 2002 Local Volunteering Banks were created and started to effectively operate to stimulate volunteering at the local level. These local and decentralised structures are generally promoted by municipalities or other local organisations and seek to facilitate the promotion of volunteering and to be a meeting point for individuals that are willing to volunteer and institutions that need volunteer contributions in order to support the implementation of their activities. According to 2019 data, there were 172 active Local Volunteer Banks and Volunteer Pools, of 192 existing banks. More recently, the CASES 2026 study identified and surveyed 198 Local Volunteer Banks.

Alongside the public authorities responsible for volunteering policy and the network of Local Volunteer Banks, several national organisations play an important role in supporting, representing and strengthening volunteering in Portugal. Some of the most relevant include the Confederação Portuguesa do Voluntariado (CPV), Pista Mágica Associação, the Federação Nacional de Voluntariado em Saúde (FNVS), which brings together volunteering associations in the health sector, and Associação Portuguesa para o Desenvolvimento Local (ANIMAR). Large volunteer-based organisations such as the Liga dos Bombeiros Portugueses and the Cruz Vermelha Portuguesa are also key actors. Until 2026, Cooperativa António Sérgio para a Economia Social (CASES) also played a central institutional role.

The Confederação Portuguesa do Voluntariado (CPV), established in 2007, acts as a representative body for volunteers and volunteering organisations, promoting cooperation and advocating for the recognition and development of volunteering. It also represents Portuguese volunteers and volunteering organisations and defends their rights and interests. Unlike the public bodies responsible for implementing volunteering policy, the CPV is a civil society umbrella organisation, bringing together 48 organisations.

CASES - Cooperativa António Sérgio para a Economia Social played a central institutional role in volunteering between 2017 and 2026, when it was responsible for several public support and promotion functions. Following the 2026 reform, these public responsibilities were transferred back to the Public Administration.
Pista Mágica Associação is a non-profit organisation specialising in volunteering, particularly in training, capacity-building, volunteer management and social innovation.

There are a variety of other civil society organisations active in Portugal, taking the form of associations, cooperatives, foundations, local development organisations, holy houses of mercy, non-governmental organisations for development, and private institutions of solidarity.

**Associations**

There are many forms of associations in Portugal, namely associations of voluntary firemen, consumer protection, education, students, families, immigrants, youth, women, parents, disabled, environment, leisure, and cultural activities. Each has specific by-laws regulating them.

**Local development organisations**

Local development organisations were created after the Portuguese accession to the European Union. They intervene on training activities, adult education, research and development, environmental protection, and support to the elderly population.

**Holy Houses of Mercy**

The first Holy House of Mercy was established in 1498, as a charitable institution dedicated to improving health and social problems. Nowadays they focus on providing healthcare, education and cultural opportunities to people in vulnerable situations, experiencing disadvantage or social exclusion. There are currently 388 Holy Houses of in Portugal (2026), united in an umbrella organisation representing their interests, and are called União das Misericórdias.

**Non-governmental organisations for development (NGDOs)**

These are private non-for-profit structures. They intervene especially in the field of cooperation for development, education for development, humanitarian and emergency aid. A Portuguese Platform of NGDOs was created in 1985; today it counts 61 members.

**Private Institutions of Solidarity (IPSS)**

Such institutions are not-for-profit legal persons, set up exclusively on private initiative, which seek to give organised expression to the moral duty of justice and solidarity, contributing to the realisation of citizens' social rights, provided they are not administered by the State or another public body. The majority of IPSS in Portugal are Holy Houses of Mercy, parishes and social centres, mutual associations and social solidarity associations.

# *5. OTHER STAKEHOLDERS*

**Private Sector**

The private sector plays an increasingly visible role in volunteering in Portugal, particularly through corporate volunteering programmes. GRACE - Empresas Responsáveis, a business network focused on sustainability and corporate responsibility, is one of the main organisations promoting corporate volunteering.

Historically, one of the most prominent corporate volunteering initiatives in Portugal was G.I.R.O., Grace, Intervene, Recover and Organise, developed by GRACE - Empresas Responsáveis, whose first edition took place in 2006 and which was relaunched as GIRO 2.0 in 2019. In terms of numbers, in 2021, for instance, GIRO mobilised over 500 employees from different companies to participate in community-based volunteering activities, spending a total of 2412 hours in volunteering contributions.

A prominent current example is the EDP Volunteering Programme, which has been operating since 2010 and involves employees in social, environmental and skills-based volunteering. The programme allows employees to dedicate working time to volunteering and currently supports initiatives in areas such as social inclusion, biodiversity, energy poverty, education and community development.

**Public Sector**

As mentioned, following the institutional reform of 2026, the Direção-Geral do Emprego

As mentioned, following the institutional reform of 2026, the Direção-Geral do Emprego e das Relações de Trabalho (DGERT) became responsible for the coordination and implementation of public volunteering policies, including technical support to volunteer-involving organisations and the organisation of national campaigns and programmes. The Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional (IEFP) is responsible for training in the field of volunteering.

Local authorities also play an important role, particularly through the promotion or support of Local Volunteer Banks and other municipal volunteering initiatives.

**Education**

Citizenship education remains part of the Portuguese school curriculum through Cidadania e Desenvolvimento (Citizenship and Development), a curricular component established under Decree-Law No. 55/2018. It aims to promote active citizenship, democratic participation and civic responsibility throughout compulsory education. Volunteering is often chosen as the practical form of active participation. An optional class with the subject “Law and Volunteering” is taught in the private Catholic University of Lisbon. The class includes both theoretical and practical components, including effective volunteering activities.

At higher education and youth level, volunteering opportunities are also supported through European programmes. The European Solidarity Corps provides young people, generally aged 18–30, with opportunities to take part in individual or team volunteering projects in Portugal and other European countries, particularly in areas such as social inclusion, education, environmental protection and community development. Erasmus+ also supports Youth Participation Activities, promoting non-formal learning, civic engagement and young people's involvement in democratic life at local, national and European level.

# *6. FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES*

At public level, one of the main specific support mechanisms has been the Medida de Apoio ao Voluntariado (MAV), established in 2018. It provides financial support to eligible volunteering organisations, particularly to cover personal accident and civil liability insurance for volunteers involved in continuous volunteering activities in the social field. Volunteering organisations may also access broader national and European funding programmes, including Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, depending on the nature of their activities and target groups, as well as the programme

Portugal 2030, the framework through which Portugal implements European cohesion funds for the 2021–2027 period. This last programme funds projects in areas such as social inclusion, employment, education and training, innovation, the digital and green transitions, and territorial development in Portugal.

Other voluntary organisations are independent from the state and have their own budgets. Other sources of funds for the voluntary sector in Portugal are donations and fundraising events (for example, the Portuguese League against Cancer organises, with the support of volunteers, an annual national collection to raise funds).

International Medical Assistance (AMI) a non-governmental humanitarian organisation and Cáritas Portuguesa promote the revitalisation of the social actions of the church and rely on other forms of financing. Other examples are partnerships with banks, as the case of Montepio.

# 7. REGULAR AND SYSTEMATIC RESEARCH

Research on volunteering in Portugal has developed since the first major national study, carried out in connection with the 2001 International Year of Volunteers. Commissioned by the National Commission for the International Year of Volunteers and conducted by researchers from the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon, Caracterização do Voluntariado em Portugal (Characterisation of Volunteering in Portugal, Delicado, Almeida & Ferrão, 2002) examined the framework for volunteering in Portugal, the profile of volunteers and the types of third-sector organisations involving them.

The most recent comprehensive official statistical survey of individual volunteering remains the Survey on Volunteer Work (Inquérito ao Trabalho Voluntário - ITV) 2018, conducted by Statistics Portugal (INE) in partnership with CASES. It estimated that approximately 695,000 people aged 15 and over volunteered in Portugal, corresponding to a total volunteering rate of 7.8%. Formal volunteering accounted for 6.4% of the population and informal volunteering for approximately 1.5%. Volunteers contributed an estimated 263.7 million hours, equivalent to around 2.9% of all hours worked in the Portuguese economy. Depending on the valuation methodology used, the economic value of volunteer work was estimated at between 0.4% and 0.8% of national GDP.

More recently, CASES commissioned the study Recolha e Análise de Dados sobre o Universo do Voluntariado em Portugal (Collection and Analysis of Data on the Universe

of Volunteering in Portugal), carried out by Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos (IESE), completed in 2025. The study combines desk research, interviews, case studies and an online survey of volunteering involving organisations (OPVs), Local Volunteer Banks and higher education institutions, identified with the support of databases from CASES, CPV, Pista Mágica and ANIMAR. It provides an updated assessment of volunteering practices, organisational capacity, volunteer profiles and emerging challenges. Among its findings, the absence of a specific budget for volunteering was the most frequent response among surveyed organisations (34.9%), and the study notes that there is no systematic research system on volunteering in Portugal, with existing studies being one-off initiatives.

Another significant piece of research worth mentioning is the academic study by Jacinto (2020), Evolução do Voluntariado em Portugal (2002–2020), which provides an overview of the development of volunteering in Portugal, including the profile of volunteers, the number of hours worked and the economic contribution. There are also more specific studies, such as that by Tavares, Proença & Ferreira (2022) on formal volunteering in Portuguese hospitals, which analyses the roles and management of hospital volunteers through 46 interviews.

Other studies on volunteering in Portugal are published by the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) (Volunteering in Portugal: Facts and Figures Report, edited in 2008, Volunteering Infrastructure in Europe - Portugal Chapter, edited in 2012 and updated in 2026, and the State of European Volunteering Report 2026, edited in 2026).

More recently, the International Volunteer Year 2026 (IVY 2026) has provided renewed momentum for research and evidence-building on volunteering. In this context, GRACE and ISCTE are conducting a national study on corporate volunteering in Portugal. At the global level, the State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2026, published by UN Volunteers, introduces new approaches to measuring the broader social contribution and impact of volunteering.

# *8. ETHICS AND QUALITY STANDARDS FOR VOLUNTEERING*

One important issue for ensuring quality of volunteering in Portugal is related to training for volunteers.Training is particularly important in certain areas (e.g. healthcare) where volunteers have to be well prepared before they can work by

themselves. The current legal framework recognises volunteers' right to access initial and continuous training and requires them to participate in training necessary for the proper performance of their activities. The definition of a basic training methodology for volunteers, assumed and recognised by all is essential. Local Volunteering Banks play an important role in this field by giving technical support to organisations who involve volunteers and by training volunteers.

Training and capacity-building are also provided by civil society organisations and local structures. Pista Mágica, for example, offers specialised training in volunteer management and organisational capacity-building through its Volunteer School, while Local Volunteer Banks and volunteering organisations may provide general and activity-specific preparation for volunteers.

Beyond training, quality volunteering is supported by principles established in the Portuguese Volunteering Law, including responsibility, cooperation, complementarity, respect for beneficiaries, adequate supervision, insurance, safety conditions and the definition of a formal volunteering programme between the volunteer and the promoting organisation.

## *9. AWARENESS OF VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES*

Since volunteering is organised by a large number of organisations, there is no central information point for all volunteering programmes.

To make it easier to look for volunteering programmes in Portugal, there are platforms that bring together programmes run by various organisations. Examples are the Plataforma Portugal Voluntário (Portugal volunteering platform) or the Programa Agora Nós (a national youth volunteering programme) where those interested in taking part in volunteering activities and the entities that run them can register. This therefore allows organisations with ongoing projects to find people with the right profile for their project.

Besides resources made available by Plataforma Portugal Voluntário and Programa Agora Nós for promoting volunteering, organisations active in the field also use their own promotional tools such as personalised websites, publications, studies, research reports, etc. Media is a very good tool for promoting volunteerism, additionally other

volunteers involving organisations (OPV) participate in TV and radio programmes and give interviews to magazines and newspapers. Moreover, in addition to volunteering opportunities in Portugal, international volunteering initiatives are also available. One of the more relevant international volunteering projects in Portugal is the European Solidarity Corps, which allows 18 to 30 year-olds to take part in volunteering projects lasting from 2 to 12 months in Portugal or other European Union countries.

# 10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the 2026 institutional reform, responsibility for volunteering policy is divided between DGERT, which coordinates and implements public volunteering policies, and IEFP, which is responsible for training. To ensure continuity and coordination of the sector, it would be important to set up a dedicated volunteering unit within DGERT. The sector could also benefit from a permanent consultation mechanism, involving civil society organisations in the design and monitoring of volunteering policy.

The revision of Law no. 71/98, currently under discussion, provides an opportunity to adapt the legal framework to the current reality of volunteering. This includes recognising informal and spontaneous community initiatives without adding bureaucracy, strengthening the protection of volunteering and volunteers, and recognising the role of volunteering in intergenerational cooperation.

To raise participation organisations that currently rely little on volunteers, such as many IPSS, should be supported in involving volunteers. Particular attention should go to groups with lower participation rates, such as people with lower levels of education.

Public funding for volunteering should go beyond insurance coverage under MAV to include other areas of volunteering and the costs of coordinating and managing volunteers. It should extend to other areas of volunteering and include the costs of coordinating and managing volunteers.

It would also be important to develop, together with civil society organisations, a common basic training methodology and quality framework for volunteers and volunteer managers. This should build on existing expertise, such as that of the Local Volunteer Banks and Pista Mágica.

Another recommendation is to stimulate local partnerships between businesses, NGOs and local authorities to develop new combined ways of volunteering, with a focus on

long-term and skills-based engagement that responds to community needs.

Finally, the absence of a systematic research system on volunteering should be addressed. INE, which is now responsible for Social Economy studies and statistics, should carry out the Survey on Volunteer Work on a regular basis, so that volunteering policy can be based on up-to-date and comparable evidence.

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