

“Valuing Volunteering” European Volunteer Centre Conference Report 21st November 2019 , Brussels

Supported by the Europe for Citizens Programme and the Slovak Representation to the EU.

Event introduced by Floor van Houdt, Head of Youth, Volunteer Solidarity and Traineeships Office, European Commission -Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture exploring State of Play of “Volunteering, solidarity and Youth in the EU”.

In Europe there are a variety of legal frameworks, cultures and traditions that can have an influence on how, and why, citizens volunteer. At the CEV “Valuing Volunteering” conference, held as part of the 2019 European Volunteering Congress in Brussels, 41 participants from 16 countries gathered to exchange ideas and opinions about what steps and measures are needed to ensure that the impact of volunteering, in all its forms, can be maximised as a positive force in shaping Europe based on its founding values.



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The conclusions point to a trio of elements that need to be addressed in order that volunteering can be truly and properly valued by volunteers, the beneficiaries of the actions, and society at large. The conference included a particular focus on the role and significance of the European Solidarity Corps in strengthening a culture of volunteering and solidarity in Europe that is inclusive, is value-based and rooted in community needs and takes place in the context of a supportive volunteering infrastructure.

1. Volunteering is essential for inclusive societies
2. Volunteering is a values-based action
3. Volunteering needs a supportive infrastructure
4. How can the impact of the European Solidarity Corps be maximised?



Valuing Volunteering



1. Volunteering is essential for inclusive societies

Governments alone cannot bring about a society where the respect for Human Rights, Equality and Dignity for all are respected. Volunteering should be central in building a cohesive and inclusive society based on solidarity and active citizenship. Volunteering is widely acknowledged as an outstanding source of learning and an important contributor to personal and professional development. It enables citizens to be directly active in developing the Europe they strive for and underpins active citizenship and social engagement.

Volunteering makes an immeasurable contribution to the European Social model, to security, peace, cohesion and prosperity and provides a framework for an alternative narrative to extremist and populist views and actions, contributing to its prevention. Volunteering actively prevents Hate Speech and helps create a society where the rights of all are respected. Through volunteering, people can arrive at a point of understanding others, which, in turn, helps to achieve respect for others, and plays a major role in building a society where people are empowered and the freedom to be different can be developed.

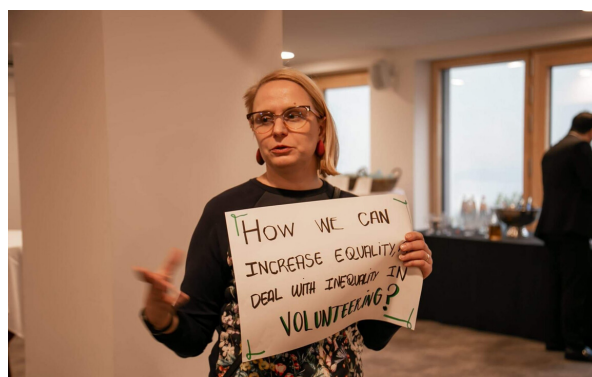
As a main agent of true social transformation, volunteering supports and promotes social inclusion and tolerance and in this way contributes to a fairer and more equal Europe. It has the power to break stereotypes and promote understanding and acceptance of differences. Given that everyone has the potential to contribute as a volunteer in order to encourage and facilitate inclusion and diversity, volunteering is in an ideal position to provide a basis and a framework for inclusive societies.

Engaging people from diverse realities and backgrounds is an important consideration for all volunteer-involving organisations. All organisations should all be concerned with increasing equality and dealing with and reducing inequality in volunteering. In order for everyone who wants to, to be able to have the opportunity to be involved as a volunteer, organisations need to create a sufficient variety of volunteering opportunities and ensure that necessary processes are in place to ensure that no-one is excluded regardless of the background or situation.

As volunteering becomes more and more visible and policymakers gain a greater and clearer understanding of the value of and benefits of volunteering it needs to be ensured that some sectors of society or individual citizens are not inadvertently or purposefully denied access to this enriching and valuable experience.

Care should be taken that as organisations introduce more bureaucracy to become better organised and to meet necessary legislative requirements that access to volunteering opportunities does not become prohibitively complicated for some people. This is also the case that poor access to the internet and/or lack of digital skills shouldn't create increased barriers to participation as some organisations and initiatives move towards an increasingly online methodology for recruitment of volunteers. It can be observed that stereotypes and prejudices can impact on who is seen to be a valid potential volunteer. For example, in a situation where refugees and asylum seekers are not universally welcomed volunteer managers may be afraid to engage them in their activities. It should be acknowledged that people from more vulnerable target groups could be treated badly by other volunteers and steps should be in place to safeguard against this.

It is important that all organizations in whatever context raise awareness about volunteering among different target groups for recruitment and that when new policies and programmes are developed the accessibility for different groups of citizens from different backgrounds and situations has been taken into account. Volunteer managers should ensure that sufficient and suitable training opportunities are available for existing staff and volunteers about stereotypes, cultural differences etc before introducing new volunteers from more vulnerable target groups into organizations. It is important to explain volunteering to different target groups and as a volunteer involving organization be visible amongst diverse groups of people. This may mean adapting vocabulary and thinking carefully about the variety of communication channels that can be used for recruitment campaigns etc.



Using role models is a good approach to give a visible face to the variety of people who can volunteer in different roles and when volunteer-involving organizations already have people from varied backgrounds as volunteers they should all be used as spokespeople. For those organisations with experience of engaging volunteers from different backgrounds it is important to share those experiences with other organizations in order to give an example and increase their confidence about what is possible when the right support structures are in place.

It is important to provide financial support to cover any out of pocket expenses that people might incur whilst volunteering in order to make volunteering accessible to all regardless of financial situation. The amount of documents (agreements, reports) that volunteers have to fulfill should be kept as minimal as possible for the specific position. Volunteer-involving organisations should develop volunteering programs and volunteer roles that are suitable for different target groups (for migrants, for elderly, for people with special needs for example). The need for mentors for volunteers from specific groups should be considered as a way to foster and support inclusivity.





2. Volunteering is a values-based action

The values that motivate people to act in solidarity in defence of the rights of others should be widespread in Europe, but for this way of life to flourish an enabling environment for volunteering, that promotes shared responsibilities & European values, is needed. Volunteering translates the fundamental values of justice, solidarity, inclusion and citizenship, upon which Europe, is founded into action. Acting as a volunteer means having a positive impact on people and the environment, it's a collective action that moves values into practice. In this regard, whilst the important role of volunteering organisations in providing much-needed services to citizens such as in the social welfare, education, sport or health sectors should be recognised and properly resourced, to limit volunteering to a mere service provider represents a severe limitation to the power and potential of volunteering. In some contexts, social entrepreneurs are being encouraged to engage volunteers.

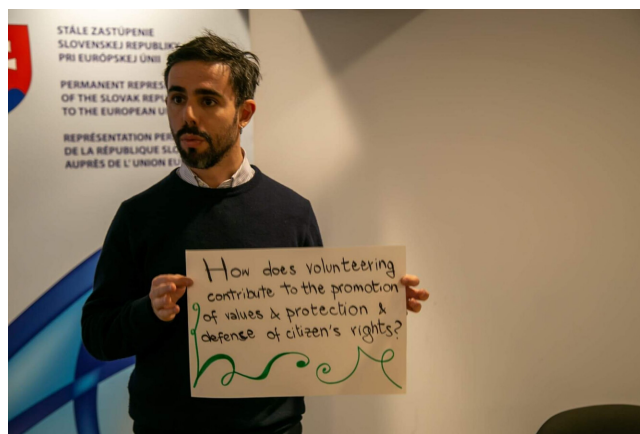
Care must be taken that if the social entrepreneurship generates personal profit for founders, owners or shareholders, as is possible in many countries in Europe, that volunteers are engaged on an ethical basis founded in a shared belief in the social objectives of the entity and they are not being exploited as cheap labour as way of generating increased profit for owners and shareholders. Volunteering stakeholders should monitor whether the increasing trend in naming, branding and registering on a legal basis as a social enterprise, rather than a not-for-profit NGO, and recruiting volunteers to such organisations, is an approach that upholds the values of solidarity and benefit for the common good on which volunteering is based or is rather a cynical marketing ploy aimed at taking advantage of potential volunteers and clients.

Volunteering stakeholders concerned about protecting volunteering as a values-based action should consider carefully the interaction with social enterprises and monitor the important trends around their development and relationships with volunteers and volunteering. Volunteer Centres help match people who want to volunteer with organisations that need volunteers. But this can mean that requests are made to deal with controversial volunteering opportunities, for example, volunteering roles that may be job substitution, roles with a controversial organisation such as some religious or pseudo-religious groups, roles with anti-human rights movement, roles in public services, or roles on opposing sides of a political debate such as environmental projects to re-introduce wild animals in a specific area. Volunteer Centres should carefully consider if they should agree to advertising all volunteering roles without any judgement, or whether judgements should be made about what roles can be advertised. Additionally, agreement should be reached in each entity about the agreed criteria for decision-making about whether or not to advertise roles.

There is general consensus amongst volunteering stakeholders that in an era of changing civic space and new forms of activism that it is a challenge to know how best to support volunteering in a way that is fair and diverse but at the same time protects the integrity of volunteering as a force for good and defence of human rights for all.

Out of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many are linked to community development in its many formats and all have intrinsic connections with volunteering. Specifically, SDG11 aims for sustainable cities and communities, and the contribution of volunteering to sustainable communities is unquestionable. There is a gap however between how volunteers contribute to SDGs and how their contribution is actually evaluated and linked back with the SDG agenda. Volunteer-involving organizations are generally not well-informed and/or do not have access to standardized measurements of SDG implementation and they create their own methods, but the results are not linked back with official measurements of SDGs.

From a certain perspective, any volunteering activity can be linked with at least one SDG but there is a lack of clarity around how organizations could actually allocate the volunteer hours and expertise dedicated to a particular SDG so that they can be included in official measurements in such a way that would genuinely reflect the value of such volunteering. Organizations working with volunteers do not necessarily give overt priority to implementation of SDGs in their daily activity. Organizations have their mission and values as the main driver for their activities and volunteers adhere to the cause of the organization. They already have a lot of activities to undertake and little or no incentive to invest time and energy in reporting as concerns SDGs. Additionally, it is not clear what would be the benefit of volunteer-involving organizations to invest time and energy in measuring the contribution of volunteering to the implementation of SDGs.



SDGs are a wide framework very far from the daily activity of organizations. In between the SDG framework there are the Countries that report to UN directly and often the focus of their reporting is on whatever the public sector is doing and does not include the activity of NGOs or volunteers. There seems to be a missing link between the UN and State levels on the one side and organizations and volunteers on the other side. There might be a role for municipalities to link the SDGs framework with local groups and activities, including volunteering. On the other hand there are topics within the SDGs that are of great interest and relevance for each of us and as individuals we cannot disregard them completely. A solution would be for us to (re)define the SDGs in ways that are meaningful for us at the local level or for volunteers at the individual level, or to find concrete elements that we can directly relate to and feel motivated by that link with the values of the organisations and the values that drive volunteers to engage with particular causes.





3. Volunteering needs a supportive infrastructure

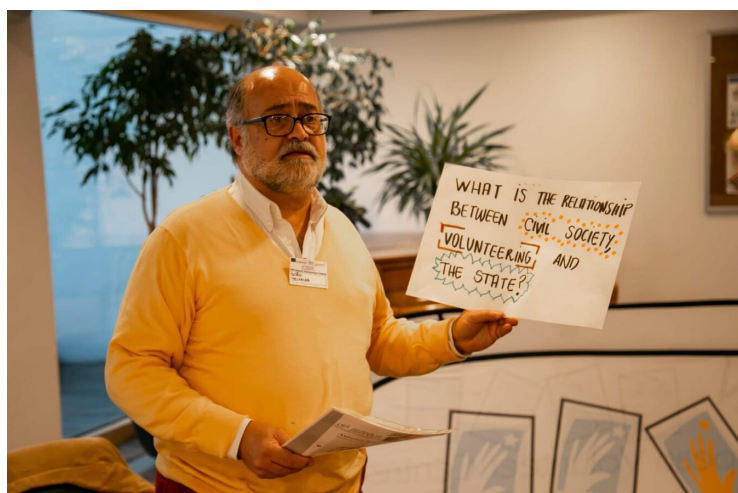
A good, healthy relationship between the State and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), volunteer based and/or volunteer promoters, is an essential condition for good quality volunteering. It is important to ensure that this right, that should incorporate the free decision of the CSO about the areas of volunteering involvement in the communities, is an integral part of the community development, at all levels within Europe. This relationship should be supported by protocols and a regular system of financial or logistical support granted by national governments (and/or any other level of government). What this should include however is a matter of debate and influenced heavily by the culture and traditions of volunteering in the area of Europe concerned. Despite these differences there is overwhelming agreement from participants in the conference that current trends by some Governments in Europe to weaken civil society and 'shrink' the available 'civic space' should be resisted and overturned.

In parts of Europe such as Scandinavian countries and in the United Kingdom and Ireland, for example, there is no Law on Volunteering, as the need for that is not felt, given that 'regulation' is done through other legal documents such as employment law and child protection laws. In countries such as Spain, Belgium, Portugal, Italy or Poland, for example there is a specific Law on Volunteering. Considering that Volunteering brings a value added contribution to society, regardless of the existence or not of a specific Law, it is important that there is a right for every volunteer to have a 'volunteering agreement' to express their rights and duties as a volunteer and of the volunteer-involving organisation.

Regardless of the existence of a specific law on volunteering, in any supportive legal framework for volunteering there is a need for defined assistance from public institutions and budgets (national, regional or local), be it financial or material, to help volunteers and organisations in their endeavors to meet needs in their communities. An example of this supportive framework from the State could be the use of out-of-use infrastructures/ buildings that volunteers could use in order to better meet their objectives. By doing so, the State would have protection and maintenance of its assets and CSOs would have a place, or a territory, to develop their work. In kind support in this way can be as impactful as direct financial support. Financial support from the State to volunteer initiatives and organisations should in no way reduce their independence and/or create conflicts of interest within the supported organisations. It should be considered as an obligation of the State – and a right of the organisations –, thus creating conditions for the empowerment of the organisations.

Public authorities should consider increased support to CSOs which are closer to the problems they want to solve rather than trying to contribute through direct public services. Freedom of association is a right in democratic societies. As a result, CSOs should have the right to choose the area or areas of intervention, the right to have their own political agenda – which might not be the same of the State/Government (whatever level) – and being supported for their contribution to the so-called common good. Civil society should be heard and taken into consideration by the State and be recognised as a partner.

It is a widespread belief across European policymakers from across the political spectrum that since volunteering is an activity based on free will, it does not seek or require structured models of support. The existing concepts of leadership for volunteering in Europe vary in many respects, from volunteer centers that in most cases retained the original idea of serving as a local volunteer development agency, to national networks dedicated to the research and development of volunteering as a multidimensional social agenda.



On the local level, local volunteer centres are needed and should be supported by national agencies, platforms or networks specialised in supporting and promoting volunteering. In some smaller communities, without volunteer centres or where a volunteer centre is not needed then volunteer-involving organisations can play an important role in supporting one another and also newly established, citizen-led volunteer-based initiatives. Community initiatives and pop-up voluntary initiatives are increasingly relevant also for development of personal leadership and responsibility to make a change.

In this context opportunities for networking mutual support, sharing ideas, cross-sectoral networks are crucial for success and sustainability. National youth councils and voluntary sector/ civil society networks are also recognised as an important stakeholder or other similar councils that can be catalysts for important cross-sector cooperation.



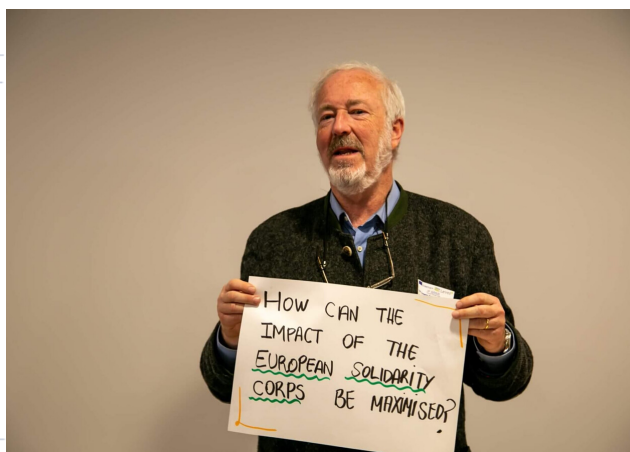
It is important to ensure that all volunteering infrastructure has access to much-needed regular financial support from local and national governments or private donors. Opportunities to gain support through in-kind contributions is also an important factor and can be extremely helpful in order to enable volunteer organisations and volunteer-led initiatives to be more responsive to social needs.



4. How can the impact of the European Solidarity Corps be maximised?

It is important that the possibility to engage with the ESC programme is not limited to actors in the youth field only and that the whole of the Solidarity and volunteering sector can be involved. For this, the process for organisations to gain the quality label should be understandable and accessible for a diverse range of volunteer-involving organisations. ESC volunteering or engagement with the ESC jobs and traineeships should ideally lead to a lifetime of solidarity actions and volunteering engagement for the young participants. There are a number of conditions that need to be in place for this to happen and for the impact of the ESC to be maximised. It has been noted that the ESC programme increases local volunteering activities and their quality (increasing opportunities for non- EU countries) and the implementation of the programme results in the increase of civic engagement and new opportunities to improve mentoring and technological tools in support to EU programmes.

In order to maximise the programme impact, it can be useful to enhance the originality of the programme and emphasises what makes the ESC exceptional from other opportunities offered at European, National and local levels. This can be further underlined with a development on the use of Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, widely used by young people) done by the EU Institutions and an increase in the promotion and dissemination of the programme. Sharing experiences done within the programme with the wider public (focusing on those lived by ESC members with fewer opportunities) and also taking into account negative experiences reported by former ESC volunteers/trainees/employees can establish a closer contact with current, future and past participants and guarantee a constant development of the programme and mutual learning.



The creation of better links between the ESC Programme and existing National or regional opportunities or those offered by civil society organisations, is fundamental in order to increase the complementarity and collective impact of the different experiences available.





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