

Volunteering in Solidarity - Volunteering in Europe (ViS a ViE) Report | October 2018 Brussels

The European Volunteer Centre (CEV) works to promote an enabling environment for volunteering in Europe. Volunteering is a main agent of true social transformation, supports social inclusion, solidarity, underpins active citizenship and social engagement, promotes shared responsibilities & European values. Volunteering contributes to the European Social model, to security, peace, cohesion and prosperity. It provides a framework for an alternative narrative to extremist and populist views and actions and can contribute to its prevention. Volunteering actively prevents Hate Speech, promotes inclusion and tolerance and enables citizens to be directly active in developing the Europe they strive for. CEV connects individual and collective volunteer efforts to the European context and promotes and defends European Rights and Values, and make a bridge between local & national volunteering strategies and European policy frameworks. The ViS A ViE conference provided the opportunity for over 60 representatives from more than 20 countries and organisations to gather together to consider how volunteering promotes and supports solidarity in times of crisis. In the framework of CEV's 5R policy priorities for volunteering, participants discussed five volunteer & solidarity-related topics: the European Solidarity Corps (ESC); Volunteering and Welfare Payments; Volunteering in Events; Voluntourism; and Inclusive Volunteering.

Voluntourism has a clear value to the economy as an expanding multi-billion euro industry but it is of concern that some voluntourism programs are mis-sold and participants can pay fees for experiences which are little more than a holiday and provide no real volunteering opportunities or involve actions capable of bringing added value to meet real local needs. There is also a perception that undertaking 'volunteering' experiences while on holiday is a way to bring value and mitigate any negative impact that holiday-makers might have on the local environment or people. Guidelines should be developed that would be useful for individuals, tour operators, tourism companies, organisations & infrastructure bodies, in addition to policymakers. They could include aspects such as clarity and transparency about: who is getting paid, for what; who is making any profit; whose needs are primarily being met; does the experience have the potential to lead to further, longer term engagement in volunteering initiatives with a higher potential for real impact?

Studies have demonstrated the advantages of volunteering for a person's health and well-being. Policies concerning **Volunteering and Welfare Payments** vary widely across Europe. Few demonstrate a positive awareness of the added value that being active as a volunteer can be for people, especially those who are vulnerable and entitled to welfare payments. Governments and welfare payment agencies should recognise the positive impact of volunteering on volunteers and society overall when designing social security policies. They should examine existing policies, regulations and training for welfare agency staff and amend, as necessary, in order to remove all barriers that people face in accessing volunteering and consider that volunteering in relevant activities can contribute to increasing an individual's employability &/or health and well-being.

Volunteers in Events should be treated fairly and with due concern to the applicable volunteering legal framework and quality standards. The rationale for their engagement should be to bring added value to the event rather than as a cost-cutting measure. Volunteering quality standards should be maintained in events and hosting countries and sport and other sectoral governing bodies should work with the appropriate volunteering infrastructure organisations to ensure that this happens. The European Commission should ensure that any barriers to the free mobility of EU volunteers wishing to volunteer in events in another EU Country are investigated and, where appropriate, eradicated.

The main issues for the success of the **European Solidarity Corps** are: how to clearly ensure a distinction between traineeship placements and volunteering placements; how to involve beneficiary groups and implementing organisations in the management of the programme; the engagement of the for-profit sector, particularly as regards volunteering; how quality will be ensured, especially the training and mentoring of volunteers; how the programme can be linked to a broader policy framework for solidarity and volunteering.

REAL VALUE

The **European Solidarity Corps** represents an excellent opportunity to refocus volunteering away from being viewed mainly as an educational experience, towards one that leads to the promotion of a genuine culture of volunteering and solidarity. The possibilities for in-country volunteering provides a gateway for young people to be introduced to volunteering in an accessible way, putting into practice European values and bringing an increased spirit of inclusion and tolerance to the local level in an European context. The proposed age limit for EU Aid Volunteers represents a contradiction with need for experiential learning however and could lead to a decreased value for this important resource.

Volunteering in Events can certainly bring added value to individuals and society but for this to be truly at its maximum requires that volunteers be given high quality tasks under clearly specified conditions that imply excellent teamwork and a proper balance between volunteers and staff in terms of numbers, responsibilities and roles. Anyone involved in participating in, or facilitating, volunteering in events, whether they be large ones that would happen anyway but just in a less cost effective way without volunteers, or small ones that would be impossible to realise without volunteer effort, should ask what is the added value for the common good and communities and ensure that conditions are in place for this.

Inclusive Volunteering: Volunteering is in an ideal position to provide a basis and a framework for inclusive societies given that everyone has something to contribute as a volunteer to encourage and facilitate inclusion and diversity. Volunteering should be central in building a cohesive and inclusive society based on solidarity and active citizenship. Through volunteering people can arrive at a point of understanding others that helps to achieve respect for others, and build a society where the freedom to be different can be developed.

Everyone should have the freedom to volunteer, including those potentially at risk, such as unemployed people. Volunteering should be seen as having a positive value in enhancing employability & well-being. There is no reason to forbid volunteering for **Welfare-Claimants** based on a perception of a negative impact on availability to work, or a symptom of an abuse of the social security system. Volunteers should not lose their entitlement to payments if they receive accommodation, board and pocket-money from the organisation or project where they volunteer. Public authorities should remove any requirement to request permission to volunteer or to provide specific details about the causes for which a person is volunteering in relation to assessment for benefit entitlement.

Governments alone cannot bring about a society where the respect for Human Rights, Equality and Dignity for all are respected. **Volunteering should be inclusive** and be central in building a cohesive & inclusive society based on solidarity & active citizenship. Organisations & public institutions should make every effort to ensure that their volunteering policies & programmes facilitate opportunities that are open to all whatever their background and/or situation. They should ensure that when volunteers are engaged it is in a way that is inclusive and compatible with a good work-life balance and that the emerging situation of the 'gig' economy, with zero hours contracts and precarious work conditions, is taken into account when designing roles and rotas for volunteers.

The skills and the permissions required for the advertised **Voluntourism** experience should be carefully evaluated. If there is no information, the relevant national laws should be consulted. If it is banned in the country where a voluntourist comes from, or seems ethically conflictive, it should not be promoted and both sending and receiving countries, and the agencies involved, must endorse more specific laws regarding the conditions around the qualifications for certain kinds of voluntourism. This would ensure not only the quality, but also the sustainability of the projects and their impact.



Different cultures do not mean different world and Voluntary should adapt to the differences and use **Voluntourism** as a tool to learn and make a sustainable change of the social perceptions and social distance. It is important to question whether or not the intentions to go volunteering abroad are for the benefit of others or for own egos. Exploitation must be completely eliminated from voluntourism. It is important to check the conditions offered by agencies and projects and whether stereotyped images are used. To be sustainable, a project must generate a well-prepared base of contributors and volunteers that nurture the program on a long-term basis. Volunteering is not about who 'saves' whom. There must be a shift in the marketing of the conditions of the communities and those who decide to engage in voluntourism.

The **ESC** offers unprecedented opportunities to promote and support social inclusion of vulnerable groups through engagement in volunteering activities in a European Context, especially through 'in-country' options, avoiding the need for travel abroad, even if in vulnerable or excluded situations all volunteers should be supported to provide a true added value to the cause they are supporting. Additional pressure to organisations and initiatives due to complex hosting and supporting needs should be avoided. The true value and meaning of volunteering can only be reached when volunteers themselves, even if from groups usually considered as beneficiaries of volunteering rather than the protagonists, are genuinely a source of support for others. With the right support, organisations will be able to reach out and offer opportunities to all whatever their background or situation.

In order to offer truly **Inclusive Volunteering**, volunteer-involving organisations and public institutions should assist volunteers in obtaining and maintaining genuine and meaningful volunteering placements through the provision of relevant and appropriate support. This should take into account that while all volunteers need support in order to realise their full potential, some volunteers may require additional support in order to realise their volunteering engagement in a way that ensures the intended impact. Volunteer-involving organisations and public institutions, and the infrastructure organisations that support them, should be properly resourced and financed in order to ensure that volunteering is open and accessible to all, respecting ethical principles and quality guidelines in order to deliver high impact, needs-led, value-added, voluntary-based actions.

In some European Countries unemployed people, or others, who are legally entitled to receive **Social Welfare Benefits**, can be subjected to limitations regarding their volunteering activities. In some cases, people in receipt of unemployment allowances or other welfare payments such as sick or disability pay are permitted to volunteer but only within certain sectors. Volunteering when unemployed or claiming sick or disability benefits is a person's individual decision to contribute to the society and the public good. It should not be the reason for losing social benefits but rather seen as an added value and investment resulting in a future reduction in the need for payments as a consequence of the life improvements seen for so many people when they volunteer.

REFUGEES

Opportunities for **Volunteering in Events** need to be offered and made available to people from all backgrounds and situations. The value of this type of volunteering can be even greater when focused on the objectives of inclusion and integration of marginalised groups. Efforts to remove barriers due to physical or intellectual capacity, formal qualifications, age, cultural differences, or any other characteristic that can cause people to be marginalised and excluded, should be intensified by all organisations and agencies involved in engaging volunteers for events. Authorities should ensure that all event volunteering in their jurisdiction is inclusive.

Volunteer-involving organisations & public institutions should ensure that their volunteering opportunities are **Inclusive & Open to all** regardless of background and/or situation as regards individuals who need additional support because of social obstacles such as: disability, educational difficulties, economic limitations, cultural differences, health problems, geographical barriers, as well as socio-economic background. Hosting entities should develop an environment where volunteers from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds and contexts can implement actions together. Ensuring that, whilst respecting the values base, principles of quality volunteering, & the rights of vulnerable groups, volunteering opportunities are accessible to all citizens who wish to contribute their time & skills in this way.

The removal of limitations concerning **Volunteering and Welfare Payments** to asylum seekers in several European Countries is a very welcome development. Volunteering can provide an ideal complementary activity for refugees, asylum seekers and other socially excluded people as they try to integrate or re-integrate into a community. It can even lead to finding employment and reducing the need for benefit payments, and as such, should be strongly encouraged.

When providing opportunities to **Volunteer in Events** organisations and agencies should ensure complete transparency concerning financing. Organisers should put in place mechanisms so that people with less financial capacity to pay their own travel, accommodation and/ or food whilst volunteering also have the possibility to volunteer. Engaging in activities solely or mainly in exchange for free tickets should be monitored very carefully in order not to undermine the intrinsic value of volunteering.

RESOURCES



The fact that the **European Solidarity Corps** will, in the future, have its own funding stream is a positive development and helps to re-position volunteering primarily as a solidarity-focused activity seeking to meet the needs of others and the common good rather than as a programme aiming to mainly meet the needs of volunteers and the development of their own skills and competencies, as is the case when funded as part of education and training activities. More resources are still needed however in order that as many people as possible can have access to the opportunities offered.

It is important to know where the money spent for a volunteering experience is going. **Volunteers** have to challenge whether or not the presence of the project has indeed improved the conditions. If the situation is similar to what it has been like for years, this project might be profiting from misery. Projects that involve children or other vulnerable people must be very carefully evaluated and the recommendation is not to undertake these kinds of short term volunteering opportunities in any institutional setting involving children or other vulnerable groups.



VOLUNTEERING ECOSYSTEM



In order to be sure to offer **Inclusive Volunteering** opportunities, volunteer-involving organisations and public institutions should ensure that they develop a suitable range of roles and functions for volunteers that can take into account differing skills and competencies and personal situations of existing and potential volunteers. Organisations should ensure that suitable processes are in place to enable volunteers to have any learning outcomes validated should they so wish, whilst at the same time ensuring that the societal needs, and those of the direct beneficiaries of the actions, are paramount.

Governments should review their policies concerning **Volunteering and Welfare Payments** and take into account that volunteering in relevant activities can contribute to increasing an individual's employability by enabling people to gain hard and soft skills or competencies and by increasing their confidence and self-esteem. As such, volunteering should be included as an eligible activity to be undertaken, at a person's own free will (in line with the principles of volunteering), in full or part replacement of other training and self-development opportunities offered or required by State services as a condition for receipt of benefits.

Many people choose to **Volunteer in Events** in order to gain specific work experience in relation to event and project management. Managers of volunteers in events should seek to identify if this is the case and if so, volunteers should be provided with suitable mechanisms to have their learning outcomes documented, assessed, certified and validated if they so desire.

RECOGNISING



Voluntourism is an activity that facilitates and strengthens multiple skills that might look good on a CV. However, it is important to remember that this is not the main goal of volunteering. There are many reasons why people could volunteer apart from the personal gains in terms of labour prospects. In this sense, for a better quality volunteering experience, instead of treating the CV aspect of voluntourism as a main reward, it should be understood as a complementary element to the services provided to meet the needs of communities.

Engagement as a volunteer member of the **ESC** is an excellent way for young people to experience non-formal & informal learning & develop skills & competencies, whilst at the same time expressing solidarity & acting to meet the needs of others & society in general. The use of Youtpass can make a great contribution to enabling ESC volunteers to identify & showcase the skills & competencies that they have developed, including transversal soft skills such as creativity and empathy, during their volunteering actions. Links with Europass and the possibilities that it will offer for the validation of skills & competencies gained through non-formal and informal learning whilst volunteering is also important.