



EUROPEAN VOLUNTEER CENTRE

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CHAPTER



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DUTCH-SPEAKING
COMMUNITY

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VOLUNTEERING
INFRASTRUCTURE
IN EUROPE



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Belgium is a federal and multilingual state. Its linguistic groups are the Dutch-speaking community (representing around 60% of the population), the French-speaking community (around 40% of the population) and a small German-speaking community (less than 1%). In addition to the Capital of Brussels region, which is bilingual, the two largest regions in the country are Flanders, the Dutch-speaking Region, and Wallonia, the French-speaking Region.

Decision-making in Belgium is rather complex, as, according to the competence of each level, decisions can be made on a federal, community or regional level. Concerning volunteering, the legal framework exists at federal level, as it touches upon federal competences such as social security, taxes, labour law and insurance. For management related matters, quality of volunteering, subventions etc., the Communities are entitled to develop their own regulations. As a consequence, supporting measures, as well as the concrete approach and the perception of policy making in the field of volunteering can differ between the different Communities.

1. VOLUNTEERING INFRASTRUCTURE CONCEPT DEFINITION

Volunteering infrastructure can be defined as the global context of support and supportive measures in which volunteering (voluntary activities and volunteer organisations in a broad sense) can take place and flourish, from a micro to a meso and macro level, and in different fields of society: civil society, public authorities and other stakeholders.

Two very important elements of volunteering infrastructure are the comprehensive legal framework on different policy levels and the support component, including cross-sector and sector support centres and appropriate funding. Also, the existence of a research and expertise centre for volunteering is essential.

The volunteering infrastructure is involved mainly in the identification of the needs of volunteers and voluntary organisations, provision of assistance for them in an accurate and reliable way, formulation of recommendations for policy makers (on different levels), and the creation of instruments and tools to stimulate volunteering, breaking down barriers that hamper volunteering.

2. VOLUNTEERING LANDSCAPE

Volunteering is defined in the Law on the Rights of the Volunteer (2005) and in the Flemish Decree of 2009 as an activity performed by an individual, of his/her own free will, without compulsion, in favour of an organisation, a group of persons or the society, in a more or less organisational context and to be distinguished from the activity that a person does within a paid labour context. This definition is widely accepted within the political world, public opinion, and the volunteer sector, as volunteering organisations were consulted during the preparation stage of the law.

The defining features of volunteering, according to the law, are: *a volunteer as a natural person involved in an activity, which has to be developed within the framework of an organisation (associations and public sector are not excluded) without profit aims, with the volunteer active for other people or the broad society (so not helping friends or family) and not in the same context as the paid work of the volunteer.*



According to available data, approximately 1.6 million people are engaged as volunteers, which corresponds to approximately 16 % of the total population of Belgium.

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Volunteering has been facing a “revival” in recent years as most sectors in society (politics, media, and business) have recognised volunteering as an activity that creates added value. We have, however, to distinguish in the Belgian case between the federal level and the community level. The federal policy level did create a Law on Volunteering, but this doesn’t reflect much involvement of the sector. In certain Federal Administration Services, the situation is somewhat different as some suggestions made by the volunteer sector are taken into consideration, as we have seen in the case of the report on the unemployment regulations related to volunteering.

At the level of the Flemish Community, the interest from policy makers towards volunteering is higher. The National Volunteer Centre (Vlaams Steunpunt vrijwilligerswerk vzw) receives an annual grant and regularly receives additional funding for projects. The Flemish Government also implemented campaigns to bring volunteering into the spotlight, such as the annual Prize for Volunteering. The adoption of the Flemish Decree on Volunteering also testifies to policymakers’ support for volunteering in the Flemish community. The Flemish and Federal Parliaments put on their agendas questions, clarifications, or proposals on volunteering related matters.

The fact that the Flemish Community allowed the Flemish Volunteer centre to operate a National Coordinating Body for the European Year of Volunteering (EYV) 2011 in Flanders, proves the good cooperation between our centre and the Flemish policymakers.

The media does not always cover volunteering properly, as most

organisations acknowledge. Businesses, however, are more and more open to the idea of employee volunteering. Links between volunteer support centres and other types of stakeholders should be developed further.

Public opinion and vision of volunteering is still too narrow; the understanding of volunteering is restricted to traditional “care-taking” activities and new forms of volunteering are not always recognised. One explanation would be that some people involved in voluntary work, such as youngsters engaged in youth movements or people engaged in school boards or parent committees do not describe their commitment as volunteering. More work needs to be done to change the image of volunteering at different levels and with the active involvement of more stakeholders, such as media, volunteer involving organisations, public institutions, and volunteers themselves.

3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR VOLUNTEERING AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

The legal framework in Belgium reflects the federal character of the state and the specificities of the three major communities, the Dutch, the French, and the German one. The legal framework for volunteering is mainly governed at the federal level, while each of the three communities has its own good practice. Each community has the right and the possibility to set specific rules on volunteering, by establishing decrees which fall within the framework as set forth by federal legislation.



The Law on the Rights of the Volunteer is relatively recent, being adopted in July 2005 and implemented since January 2006. The law has been adopted by the federal parliament, after consultation with the volunteering sector. Due to various procedures, the law took effect only in August 2006, with the reserve that regulations on liability and insurance of volunteers were only being implemented from January 2007 to allow for procedures to be clarified and agreed upon. The Law starts with a clear definition of what can be understood by “volunteering”.

“Volunteering is an activity executed by a individual, on a free and unpaid basis, and not aimed to do him or her good, neither close friends or family, but aimed towards the organisation itself, a certain aim or the society as a whole, within an organisation not gaining profits.”

The Law regulates the following issues: volunteering by people with an allowance, reimbursement of expenses incurred by volunteers, liability of volunteers, insurance obligations, information duty, and other items. The Law sets criteria for volunteering by people with different types of allowances such as unemployment benefits or health benefits and also sets limits to the amounts that a volunteer can be reimbursed throughout one year. The liability issue is mostly protecting the volunteer, especially if the volunteering is done through a legal organisation, but there are differences

with regard to liability for volunteers outside a formalised organisation. Similar provisions apply for the insurance of volunteers. This difference between volunteers of legally registered organisations and volunteers outside this type of organisation is acknowledged to be a weakness of the legal framework as it regulates different treatment for volunteers and may thus inhibit spontaneous volunteering, outside a legally registered organisation.

The general feeling among volunteer involving organisations towards the Law is a positive one, even if there are items identified as weaknesses of the Law. The major benefit brought by the Law is the setting of a unified framework guiding the activity of organisations involving volunteers. The Law is accompanied by several sector specific regulations and also states specific regulations. Its' implementation is guarded by governmental bodies according to the level of government (federal, state, local) and to specific competences (related to unemployment, taxes etc.).

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

By “*non-profit sector involved in volunteering*” we understand “*that share of the overall non-profit sector in your country that is in any way involved in volunteering either by supporting and promoting volunteering, or by involving volunteers in daily activities, or by conducting research and policy work related to volunteering, or by functioning exclusively based on volunteer contributions*”.

Each major region of Belgium has one volunteer centre that covers the entire region. The Flemish Volunteer Centre is Vlaams Steunpunt Vrijwilligerswerk VSVw, formerly known as the “Platform voor Voluntariaat”, established in 1977. It is a not-for-profit organisation open to all volunteer organisations, regardless of their field of activity (welfare, education, health, the environment or sport) and their structure of organisation. In the beginning, it acted as a broker between voluntary workers and organisations involving volunteers. The matching between organisations and volunteers is no longer a major activity. Nowadays, the VSVw mainly supports volunteer involving organisations, informs them on the impact and meaning of the legal framework and links organisations and policy-makers through advocacy programs. The advocacy work is focused on the establishment of a favourable legal framework for volunteering and more generally, volunteer-friendly procedures and environments throughout Belgium.

In addition, the VSVw provides advice on volunteering laws and regulations, and information and educational services related to volunteering. The main beneficiaries of these services are organisations, but the centre also works with individual, volunteers if required. Its advocacy work is complemented by policy work aiming for the development of a volunteer policy. Steps towards this policy are made through implementation of several projects such as “Accreditation of prior learning” (APL), “Insurances and volunteering”, and “Support of volunteers”.

In Flanders, every province has a volunteer support centre as part of a public service, which covers the entire province. For the Dutch-speaking community in Brussels, Het Punt vzw¹

1. www.hetpuntbrussel.be/

operates as a volunteer support centre. The main types of service provided by these centres are information, training and educational programs. Beside these regional or provincial volunteer centres, local volunteer centres exist in certain communities. Some of the larger cities set up volunteer support services, sometimes specifically targeted at certain groups such as persons with a handicap, migrant volunteers etc. Some of these regional centres are membership based and some are set up by local authorities.

The collaboration between volunteer centres across Belgium is not yet clearly structured; usually it consists of issue-specific collaboration, directed towards certain publications or the management of the joint matching website. As a legacy for the EYV2011, a common policy agenda will be developed by the Flemish Volunteer Centre.

There is no national umbrella organisation in Belgium, but the Flemish Volunteer Centre tries to fulfil this function through its services, for the Flemish Community and Region. Apart from the regional volunteer centres, there are sector-specific volunteer centres and large volunteer involving organisations such as the Red Cross, Oxfam, Damiaan Foundation, youth movements and so on. Cooperation among volunteer involving organisations is similar to that between volunteer centres, being marked by their sector specific interests and also organisations' specific interests. One of the major problems that can be highlighted with regard to collaboration relates to the limited documentation of certain organisations starting initiatives related to volunteering, leading sometimes to duplication of work because no contact has been established with local volunteer centres already involved in volunteering in a certain area or field of activity.

During the EYV2011 a project aimed to gather cross-sectoral information and experiences was set up. The findings have been brought together on a website.

5. OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Apart from the voluntary sector organisations, another important stakeholder is the Flemish Government that supports the volunteer sector, mostly through the Flemish Ministry of Welfare and the Flemish Ministry of Culture. Both provide project funding and structural support for volunteer organisations and volunteer support centres, including the Flemish Volunteer Centre. The Minister of Welfare also commissions studies related to volunteering to universities and funds large volunteering events, such as the Week of the Volunteer. In the last two years a Flemish Volunteer Award has been given to innovative volunteer organisations. The Volunteer

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Award is an initiative of the Flemish Minister President.

The federal government bears responsibilities related to the implementation of the Volunteer

Law after issuing it and has set up the High Council of Volunteers (French: Conseil supérieur des volontaires, Dutch: Hoge Raad voor Vrijwilligers, German: Hohen Rates der Freiwilligen). The High Council of Volunteers is a direct result of the 2001 International Year of Volunteers (IYV). This Council has four official functions: advice, research, information, and following the dynamics of the volunteer sector. The Council consists of representatives delegated from the volunteer sector in addition to volunteers. However, the interest of the federal authorities at the volunteer policy level remains modest, apart from some members of parliament who display

more interest in this field. The High Council of Volunteers is not funded at the required level to be able to meet its functions properly or to become a valuable resource for volunteer involving organisations.

Some businesses have employee volunteering schemes, mostly implemented in collaboration with large non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross, Mediciens Sans Frontiers, Natuurpunt.

The involvement of government and other public authorities in the promotion of volunteering is higher at the regional level than at the federal level. The regional governments include promotion of volunteering on their websites or in the community magazines they distribute.

Certain secondary schools show concern for the level of engagement of young people in volunteering. Efforts are made to facilitate the experience of volunteering for students, mostly within the Catholic schools network. This may take the form of a week's involvement, specific volunteer programs or just information about volunteering. Some universities award credits for volunteer engagement, stimulating the involvement of students in their communities.



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6. FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

The main source of funding for volunteering is the Flemish Government, providing an estimated 4 million EUR yearly. Funding takes different forms: core funding for support centres and for sector specific centres and project funding. The funding may be considered reliable, taking into account the length of the formal approval procedures. Rules for funding are generally considered acceptable, although some organisations complain about the complexity and co-funding requirements.

7. REGULAR AND SYSTEMATIC RESEARCH

Unfortunately there is a lack of accurate and consistent statistics on volunteering in Belgium. Some data was collected in 2001, but it has not been updated since. Belgium implements the United Nations' Handbook on Non-profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts. The latest data from this system is dated 2006-2007. However, the recent research is limited and volunteering has not been profiled as a priority on the research agenda at the national level. During the EYV2011 the Flemish Statistics Office carried out an inquiry on the situation of volunteering within the Flemish Community. The new figures did not show particular changes; the number of volunteers remains stable.

8. ETHICS AND QUALITY STANDARDS FOR VOLUNTEERING

There is no national unified code of ethics and no general agreed quality standards for volunteering. There are several different ways of ensuring the quality of volunteering. First, there is the organisational level where some organisations have their own standards of quality and ethical codes. There is also the sector specific approach in the welfare sector where there are certain quality standards established by the decree in this sector, having legal consequences and allowing authorities to check whether the organisations active in the welfare sector follow the standards. Most of the organisations do not favour the idea of having governmentally set quality standards and verification procedures implemented by authorities. Efforts are made to use the EYV 2011 momentum for drafting an ethical code that organisations can voluntarily adhere to. The Flemish Volunteer Centre did develop a Charter for successful volunteering.

Additional steps for quality assurance are taken within the sector by means of training and resources for volunteer involving organisations and also by the provisions on the duty of information in the Law on Volunteering, which requires organisations to inform volunteers with regard to five matters before they start their volunteer involvement: the aims of the organisation, the legal status of the organisation, civil liability insurance, the cost reimbursement procedures, the confidentiality policy with regard to beneficiaries and internal information of the organisation.

The regional centres for volunteering do have a broad offer of training and educational programs, mostly for responsible persons within volunteer organisations.

9. AWARENESS OF VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

The main tool for matching volunteers and volunteer opportunities in Flanders is the web site www.vrijwilligerswerk.be, jointly run by the Flemish volunteer centre, the Brussels volunteer centre and another five regional volunteer centres, which share the management tasks and costs for the web page. The page has brought together over 2000 registered organisations and over 2000 volunteers so far. Volunteer opportunities are updated regularly to ensure they are valid. The website is promoted constantly through all possible means and it is also used as a promotional tool during wider campaigns promoting volunteering.

Volunteerism is not always an attractive topic for the media, but sometimes, in connection to other related topics it receives coverage. One good example is the Week of Volunteering and its public activities such as fairs and festivals. To raise public awareness on volunteering and bring it to their attention, an e-magazine “tACTIEF”, containing articles on volunteering, was issued.

During the EYV2011 there were quite a lot of articles on volunteering within magazines, newspapers and even on television.

10. ADDITIONAL COUNTRY SPECIFICITIES

Over the past few years the Flemish Volunteer Centre has gained importance and legitimacy. We see lots of collaboration proposals coming to us from different stakeholders, as well as lots of information requests addressed to the centre. The capacity of the Flemish volunteer centre to provide accurate information and proper advice has laid the basis for strong partnerships that have helped build the credibility and strength of the volunteer centre in particular and of the volunteering infrastructure in general.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

The volunteering infrastructure in Belgium/Flanders would greatly benefit from more and accessible funding that would enable organisations to communicate better their work and their volunteering opportunities, develop more projects and develop community networks. As a legacy of EYV 2011 we expect more opportunities for European level projects and improved embedding of volunteering in all European funding streams.

Volunteering infrastructure at the national and European level should be better funded, a structural funding stream for the European umbrella organisations in volunteering being very helpful in allowing for sustainable development of volunteering at the European and also member state level.

At the policy level, the European Union could encourage more strongly and more actively the member states to take into account reports on volunteering infrastructure such as this, as well as invest more in this field to enable local volunteering infrastructures to perform their functions and develop further.

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Resources

Eva Hambach, 2007. De wet betreffende de rechten van de vrijwilliger Vlaams Steunpunt Vrijwilligerswerk www.vrijwilligersweb.be and www.vrijwilligerswerk.be