

Valuing Volunteering – A Major Issue for the European Year of Volunteering

A contribution to the VALUE project



www.valuenetwork.org.uk

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Bibliography

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Introduction

According to the Decision of 27 November 2009, the Council of the European Union declared that the year 2011 should be designated as the European Year of Voluntary Activities promoting active citizenship (hereinafter referred to as “the European Year”)¹.

In its article 2, it is stated that *“the overall purpose of the European Year shall be to encourage and support - notably through the exchange of experience and good practices - the efforts of the Community, the Member States, local and regional authorities to create the conditions for civil society conducive to volunteering in the European Union (EU) and to increase the visibility of voluntary activities in the EU.”*

In its introduction, the Council underlines that *“encouraging active citizenship is a key element in strengthening cohesion and the development of democracy”*. The European Year should *“contribute to showing that volunteering is one of the key dimensions of active citizenship and democracy, putting European values such as solidarity and non-discrimination into action and as such contributing to the harmonious development of European societies”*.

The purpose of our article is to remind people of the different initiatives taken to value volunteering in Europe and worldwide since the International Year of Volunteering in 2001. It corresponded in France with the centenary of the Association Act of 1901, which has been the framework and basis for the development of voluntary activities in France, mostly through associations.

Thanks to the European Year of Volunteering (EYV 2011), a study was published in 2010, with the support of the EU, which gave a snapshot of the different levels of involvement in the different European countries. Another key aim of the EYV 2011 is to disseminate the results of European projects supported by the European Commission integrating this dimension of volunteering. We have taken the examples of two projects supported under the Lifelong Learning programme. The first one is a Leonardo da Vinci project - VAEB – designed to assess voluntary experience within a professional perspective. The second one is a Grundtvig network – VALUE – which seeks to both facilitate and stimulate the development of collaboration between universities and the voluntary sector in the delivery of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) to volunteers and voluntary organisation staff.

Among the exploratory themes proposed by the VALUE project, we have developed two in particular: employability and intercultural dialogue. The link between volunteering and employment may have been considered as controversial. On the basis of two projects proposing a portfolio to students and their teachers, we will study the ways of valuing volunteering in academic courses. Voluntary involvement is also a main component of integration: we have developed three projects which seek to promote volunteering among migrants and ethnic minorities in particular.

How to value volunteering and especially a voluntary experience among particular publics (students, migrants)? We intend to show that the lifelong learning perspective provides a meaningful framework for doing this.

¹ Council Decision of 27 November 2009 on the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (2011), 2010/37/EC – 22.1.2010- Official Journal of the European Union

I. From the International Year of Volunteering 2001 to the European Year of Volunteering 2011

The initiative of celebrating 2011 as the European Year of Volunteering was taken by the European Centre for Volunteering (CEV)² together with the members of the Alliance, ten years after the International Year of Volunteering, which was then initiated by the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE)³.

In 2001 a joint project by the Independent Sector and United Nations Volunteers gathered researchers and practitioners from ten countries, who pooled their expertise to produce a *Practical Toolkit for measuring volunteering*. The main aim of this project was to raise awareness of the importance of volunteering and assist countries worldwide in undertaking measurement studies on national, regional and local volunteering.

The toolkit explained how to promote volunteering by carrying out a comprehensive survey of its extent and nature. The guidance offered was based on experience from several countries and continents (North America, Europe, Oceania and Asia). However, it emphasised at the outset that measuring the quantitative dimensions of volunteering (extent and nature) did not give the whole truth about the value of volunteering. Its qualitative aspects, such as the impetus it gives to the stability and cohesion of society, must also be taken into account even though they cannot be measured in a comparable way⁴.

Since the beginning of the 1990, limited information was available on volunteering but the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP) which has made a systematic effort to analyse the scope, structure, financing, and role of the private nonprofit sector through a cross-section of countries around the world in order to improve knowledge and enrich theoretical understanding of this sector, and to provide a sounder basis for both public and private action towards it. This project has increased the visibility of the civil society sector in policy debates worldwide by developing the first systematic body of information about this crucial, but long-overlooked, set of institutions at the international level. Project work began in 1990 in 13 countries and now extends to more than 40 countries spanning all the regions of the world. To take advantage of the European Year of Volunteering, the CNP has joined the European Centre for Volunteering (CEV) and the Centro di Servizio per il Volontariato del Lazio (SPES) to develop a *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work*. This should be one of the principal objectives of Europe's 2011 Year of Volunteering and a lasting legacy of this Year⁵.

Meanwhile, a study on volunteering in the European Union was published by the European Commission, in 2010. The purpose of the study was to reach a better understanding of the conditions and the state of volunteering across the 27 Member States including the national, regional and local levels and to identify trends, similarities and differences, opportunities and challenges. The study was also meant to assist the Commission in determining the scope and the direction of future European-wide initiatives aimed at promoting volunteering. The aim of this study was not to define a uniform methodology for measuring volunteering in the EU, nor indeed to carry out empirical research on volunteering in the EU-27 as the Foreword

² European Centre for Volunteering – <http://www.cev.be/>

³ International Association for Volunteer Effort - <http://www.iave.org/>

⁴ Dingle (A) together with Sokolowski (W), Saxon-Harold (S), Davis Smith (J) and Leigh (R), *Measuring Volunteering : a Practical Toolkit*, Independent Sector and United Nations Volunteers, Washington, USA, 2001

⁵ Presentation of the CNP on <http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/index.php?section=content&view=9&sub=3&tri=7>

emphasises. While this report has collated and made use of a wide-range of sources to gather as much information as possible about volunteering across the EU, the discrepancies between different national surveys, studies and methods means that it has not been possible to provide a statistically accurate comparison across Europe. Therefore, the statistical analysis of the level and nature of volunteering should be seen as only indicative⁶.

II. The key issue of volunteering in Europe

The European Year of Volunteering was proposed by the Non-Profit sector (CEV and members of the Alliance) but is supported by the European institutions: the European Council and the European Parliament. Thanks to the European Year of Volunteering, studies have been carried out and initiatives taken to enrich the knowledge about voluntary action in Europe.

2.1 The European Year of Volunteering - context

In the European Union, millions of citizens are volunteering. People of all ages make a positive contribution to their community by investing some of their free time in civil society organisations, youth clubs, hospitals, schools, sport clubs, etc.

For the Commission, volunteering is an active expression of civic participation and strengthens common European values such as solidarity and social cohesion. Volunteering also provides important learning opportunities, because involvement in voluntary activities can provide people with new skills and competences and can even improve their employability. This is particularly important during this time of economic crisis. Volunteering plays an important role in sectors as varied and diverse as education, youth, culture, sport, environment, health, social care, consumer protection, humanitarian aid, development policy, research, equal opportunities and external relations.

Volunteering has a great, but so far under-exploited, potential for Europe's social and economic development. Dedicating 2011 to the topic of volunteering will help Member States, regional and local communities and civil society achieve the following objectives:

1. Work towards an enabling and facilitating environment for volunteering in the EU;
2. Empower volunteer organisations and improve the quality of volunteering;
3. Reward and recognise volunteering activities;
4. Raise awareness of the value and importance of volunteering.

The Commission expects that the European Year of Volunteering will lead to an increase in volunteering and to greater awareness of its added value, and that it will highlight the link between voluntary engagement at local level and its significance in the wider European context.

The European Year of Volunteering should help volunteers and volunteering organisations from everywhere in Europe to meet and learn what is done best in other countries. The public authorities will be able to learn more about volunteers and make volunteering easier. Citizens, who do not know much about volunteering, should find out more about it, and maybe become volunteers one day themselves. Finally, the European Year should also give recognition to the volunteers.

⁶ Study available on http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/news/news1015_en.htm

2.2 The EYV 2011- a snapshot on the volunteer effort across Europe

An analysis of the national surveys and reports on volunteering identified by key stakeholders in the Member States indicates that, there are around 92 to 94 million adults involved in volunteering in the EU. This in turn implies that around 22% to 23% of Europeans aged over 15 years are engaged in voluntary work. The national surveys tend to show lower levels of volunteering compared with some of the key European or international surveys.

There are clear differences in the level of volunteering between Member States. Whilst certain EU Member States have longstanding traditions in volunteering and well developed voluntary sectors, in others the voluntary sector is still emerging or poorly developed.

The national studies on volunteering show that the level of volunteering is:

- a) Very high in Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK as over 40% of adults in these countries are involved in carrying out voluntary activities ;
- b) High in Denmark, Finland, Germany and Luxembourg where 30%-39% of adults are involved in volunteering.
- c) Medium high in Estonia, France and Latvia where 20%-29% of adults are engaged in voluntary activities.
- d) Relatively low in Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia and Spain where 10%-19% of adults carry out voluntary activities.
- e) Low in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Lithuania where less than 10% of adults are involved in voluntary activities

This study, undertaken in the preparation for the European Year for Volunteering, proposed a general framework for the number of volunteers in Europe together with the different backgrounds from one country to another. Its main goal is to better understand the conditions and situation of volunteering in the 27 member countries in the European Union, including national, regional and local levels, as well as common points and differences, opportunities and challenges. As highlighted by the Committee of the Regions in its Opinion of April 2008 volunteering contributes to the Lisbon Agenda.

The study provides a useful basis for enriching the qualitative and quantitative understanding of volunteering, but national and bilateral analysis might also help a better understanding of volunteering and for preparing for the future of volunteering. Taking the opportunity of the EYV 2011, many organisations in several European countries have held events to think about the many assets of volunteering not only for society but also to individuals.

The European Year of Volunteering is also the occasion to highlight some concrete initiatives and projects, developed since the 2001 International Year of Volunteering, which have contributed to the valuing of voluntary experience. We would like to emphasise two of them, the Vaeb project - *Assessing Voluntary Experiences (VAEB)*⁷) initiated by *iriv* and the VALUE network⁸ initiated by the University of Liverpool.

⁷ Irv and alii, , www.europeassociations.net , a project supported by the European Commission under a Leonardo da Vinci programme.

⁸ <http://www.valuenetwork.org.uk/html/employability.htm>

2.3 Valuing Volunteering: a Leonardo da Vinci project designed to assess a voluntary experience - the VAEB project.

This project was supported by the European Commission under the Leonardo da Vinci project. It sought to identify, assess and value the competences of volunteers. It gathered 14 European partners in 7 countries (France, Austria, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland and the United Kingdom) between 2003 and 2006. It was awarded in Helsinki in 2006 for excellent practice in addressing the priorities of the Copenhagen process and promoting an enhanced European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET).

The hypothesis of this project was that associations may be the ideal place to get accustomed to and trained with novel and innovative solutions and practices, as well as to experiment or acquire new skills. For volunteers, a voluntary experience may lead to or facilitate a professional career. Identifying and evaluating the skills and qualifications acquired through volunteering in the associations should be the way to recognize and validate this informal learning. It should be very useful for people, who have no professional experience, to engage with a first activity (youngsters) and for people, who have been outside the labour market, to renew a professional activity (parents who have raised their children, sick people when they have recovered, prisoners when they are free...). A voluntary experience is an alternative way to experiment, develop or renew with specific skills and qualifications in a specific context, neither public nor private, with both professional and non-professional staff, with the goal of including and serving the general interest.

The main aim of the Vaeb project was to assess voluntary experiences by identifying, evaluating and validating skills and qualifications acquired through volunteering as a process of informal learning for a professional purpose. The first step consisted in proposing an overview of the recognition of voluntary work in each of the 7 countries and the kind of training proposed by professionals to volunteers and the qualifications they required. It then identified the main skills and qualifications developed in the voluntary activities and the ways and tools to identify them for professionals. The proposed tool and method, a portfolio and guide, were designed to identify and evaluate the skills and qualifications required and acquired in volunteering and to validate these skills and qualifications in a professional perspective. These skills and qualifications could be validated in the short term for the associations, in the long term for their partners (public and private sectors...). The main publics focused on were, first and foremost, volunteers willing to renew their involvement in the labour market: youngsters, parents after having raised the children, long term unemployed people. As indirect publics, public authorities working with associations and human resources are also considered as major users of the tool and method provided by the portfolio.

The portfolio consisted of 9 parts: a biography of the volunteer, a list of training followed, the missions fulfilled as a volunteer among the association, a method to identify the competences (thanks to a mind-map), a list of competences (a table of 26 competences), an action plan for the volunteer (to improve her/his volunteering, to find training or to access the labour market), a synthesis of the portfolio (one page to be produced to potential employer), the volunteer's curriculum vitae (presenting her/his volunteering as a professional experience) and in the annexes any document that might be relevant (such as the European CV or the presentation of the association).

Volunteering appeared to be a meaningful example of non-formal and informal learning. It is also easier to identify and value as the activities fulfilled are well organised, mostly in the framework of official associations.

2.4 Valuing volunteering: a Grundtvig project designed to enhance collaboration between universities and the voluntary sector – the VALUE Network.

The overall aim of the VALUE Network is to both facilitate and stimulate the development of cooperation between universities and the volunteering sector in the delivery of University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) to volunteers and volunteering organisation staff.

VALUE brings together representatives of the University and Volunteering sectors through a shared belief that the development of volunteers, through University Lifelong Learning (ULLL), can play a key role in the development of European society as a whole. At the centre of the Network's investigations are volunteers and the special learning – both formal and informal - that they experience in their voluntary work.

VALUE's principal aims are to bring the two sectors together to share ideas and models of working together and to explore the potential for developing new university lifelong learning opportunities for both volunteers and staff in volunteering organisations. VALUE is also developing a resource base, which includes materials (such as reports, case studies and bibliographic references) that might be of interest for organisations in both sectors.

In the context of **VALUE**, University Lifelong Learning (ULLL) means *“the provision of learning opportunities which both recognize the complex, and often sophisticated, learning that volunteering brings and respond to the diverse range of individualised goals and needs of volunteer learners”*.

VALUE's secondary aims are to facilitate learning within the Network, import experience & expertise from outside the Network both to further its own learning and contribute to the development of its resource base and make an impact beyond its membership..

An important theme developed by one of the VALUE subgroups is the one of employability in relation to university lifelong learning opportunities for volunteer organisations. All stakeholders are concerned: Volunteers, Employed managers of volunteers, Third parties (In some cases volunteers are helping provide employment opportunities) such as refugees, offenders in prison, those who are illiterate.

Another subgroup is dedicated to Intercultural Dialogue. It has identified the need to understand interculturality not only as a cross-border issue but as one which arises within member states, organisations and across generations. It is exploring the requirements that this places on volunteers as they seek to understand the organisation and individuals with which they are engaging. The Group is reviewing definitions of Interculturality and will produce a glossary which reflects its findings. The Group is also trying to identify ULLL good practice which both facilitates and promotes intercultural dialogue – particularly in relation to migration and refugees.

Those two main exploring themes are key issues for the European Year of Volunteering as we will underline it in presenting the results of projects integrating these main aims.

III. Employability - Valuing a voluntary experience for university students

One of the key issues to be addressed on the occasion of the European Year of Volunteering might be the link between volunteering and employment. Volunteers are not “job killers”: they are not competing with paid staff⁹. In the difficult economic times we are facing at the moment in Europe, volunteering is also a way to maintain an activity in many associations. When public financing returns, associations will be able to recruit employees once more, thanks to the work and support provided by the volunteers. For youngsters, volunteering has also been considered as a meaningful first professional experience¹⁰. We would like to emphasise two projects which sought to value the positive impact for youngsters in volunteering in a professional perspective.

3.1 A portfolio for students – the B&C portfolio proposed by Animafac and iriv

The association Animafac¹¹ gathers 12 000 students associations in France. It is a network willing to exchange experiences and resources to enhance students’ initiatives. Together with the Institute for Research and Information on Volunteering (iriv), Animafac has proposed a portfolio for students in order to identify and value their competences.

Inspired by the previous portfolio proposed by the Vaeb project, it proposes a grid and tables designed to support students willing to value their voluntary experience with a special focus on a professional perspective (training or job seeking). A first step consists in identifying the different activities according to academic courses. A second step sets some examples of “classic voluntary tasks undertaken”. A third step proposes a table of competences in order to express the experience in competence. A last step makes some recommendations to build a professional project and for using the portfolio as a complementary tool for a person’s resumé and letter of intent.

The B&C portfolio has been tested with students and volunteers, with the support of professionals in human resources. The impact has been quite positive both for students in gaining self-confidence and for professionals in knowing more about the voluntary experience.

3.2 An e-portfolio supporting university teachers/trainers in assessing volunteering by their students- the VAB project¹²

Also inspired by the Vaeb project, the VAB project is dedicated to university teachers & trainers (UT&T). It proposes a tool and a method to improve the global evaluation of their students by taking into account the experience they have acquired beyond university to enhance their chances for professional occupations.

The VAB project identifies, values and even validates knowledge, skills and competences developed/gained through informal or non-formal learning by students outside the universities. The VAB project should thus improve the transition between the university and the labour market.

⁹ Reference is made to “Bénévolat et emploi: concurrence ou complémentarité?”, *iriv*, Paris, 1999.

¹⁰ Reference is made to « Volunteering : an opportunity for youngsters in Europe », *iriv*, Paris, 2001

¹¹ Portfolio B&C – Animafac & iriv (2009-2010) - <http://www.animafac.net>

¹² Project Valuing experience beyond university-VAB - <http://www.vab-univ.eu>

Together with the University of Evry Val d'Essonne (Ueve), iriv has initiated this project in France and works with partners in Austria (die Berater), Greece (Hellenic Open University), Ireland (University of Limerick) and Slovenia (University of Ljubljana).

The main results of this project should be:

- a. a pedagogical tool (a portfolio) for teachers/trainers to identify knowledge, skills and competences acquired/developed beyond the university by their students through non formal and informal learning. UT&T could also validate and integrate the competences assessed in the global evaluation of their students, for instance through the delivery of ECTS;
- b. a digital development of the portfolio (an e- portfolio) from which the UT&T could also have an access to other functionalities, in particular, professional integration of students, professional opportunities for youth on the labour market in the different partners countries;
- c. a distance training (an e-training) for UT&T including a virtual tutor and a self-training in order to clarify and organize the different steps to be followed by users to implement the e- portfolio thanks to a collaborative platform;
- d. an experimentation of the e-portfolio and the e-training among UT&T, universities, councillors in professional orientation, and students' associations.

Compared with the previous project, the added value of this European project comes from officially recognising the knowledge and skills acquired by students in their volunteering, thanks to the assessment of university teachers and trainers. This is also quite difficult to use a portfolio alone. The support of UT&T is most welcome by students. The tricky part of the project is to train UT&T for such an assessment, since they are not all familiar with this approach.

IV. Intercultural Dialogue- Valuing volunteering among migrants – an innovative issue for valuing volunteering

Migrants and ethnic minorities suffer in all member states of the European Union from high unemployment. The effects of migrant and ethnic minorities volunteering as a means of integration - societal, cultural and on the labour market - and as a means of empowerment and development of the civil society is highly underestimated and disregarded. This issue is raising many questions such as the role of migrant in self-organisations, the barriers preventing migrants from volunteering, the role of national and EU policies & programmes to support migrant volunteer involvement, the role of the media, the role of local host communities, the partnership models between stakeholders, the attitude of migrants towards volunteering and barriers perceived by themselves.

4.1 Volunteering for migrants, an issue as a social and professional means of integration – the Mem-Vol project (2003) – Bridging gaps

Led by a German institute - INBAS-Sozialforschung - financed under the Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion (2002-2006) in six countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, the Mem-Vol project (2003) ¹³ aimed at promoting and facilitating volunteering and self-help of migrants and ethnic

¹³ MEM-VOL Project- [-http:// www.mem-volunteering.net](http://www.mem-volunteering.net);

minorities as an objective to combat social exclusion and poverty. Little is known about volunteering of migrants and ethnic minorities, although kinship and neighbourhood networks and ethnic communities are in the focus of research. Volunteering - in favour of the own community or for different groups - might be a means of integration into society in a double sense: e.g. by labour market counseling to facilitate employment or by educational training for children of foreign origin and by developing new skills and qualifications through volunteering. Thanks to the Mem-Vol project, a state of the art could be made on the work done both on migration and volunteering, underlining that very little work has so far drawn on either of these approaches.

4.2 Enhancing a civic and voluntary involvement among migrants – the Involve¹⁴ project (2005-2006)– Migrants’ volunteering in action

Led by the European Centre for Volunteering (EVC), supported by the European Commission within the framework of the INTI Programme, the Involve programme (2005-2006) aimed at increasing awareness of all stakeholders concerning the value of volunteering for integration. It brought together eight countries in Europe: Belgium, Germany, Austria, Spain, France, Hungary, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Migrants' involvement in voluntary and civic activities as a means for better integration was the main issue of this two year project. It sought to address the lack of knowledge about migrant volunteering including third country nationals' concepts of, and attitude towards, volunteering and national policies & actions that facilitate these activities. It has nurtured a trans-European network whose main goal has been to enhance dialogue between stakeholders; identification, exchange and dissemination of knowledge and best practice and develop recommendations for policy changes. Inspired by the Mem-Vol project, the Involve project went one step further in making concrete proposals to public stakeholders at local, regional, national and even European levels.

4.3 A French example with a special focus towards female migrants – the regional project “Tremplin Migrant (e) s”, a tool and method (2010-2011)

Led by Autremonde and Iriv together with Femmes Egalité, financed by the European Social Fund and the Regional Council in Ile de France, the Tremplin (Springboard) Migrant (e) s project - (2010-2011) promotes volunteering in Ile de France with a special focus on women. Inspired by both the Mem-Vol and Involve projects, this French project seeks to promote volunteering among migrants as a means of social integration with a special focus on women among migrants. On the occasion of the European Year for Volunteering, it will propose concrete tools: a portfolio to identify and value a voluntary experience, a guide to present examples of best practices, a blog to raise questions and propose answers (obstacles/ barriers and solutions). Compared to the previous projects, the approach is more pragmatic - it states the hypothesis that only concrete actions may change the perspectives.

There are still pending questions concerning volunteering and migration: volunteering and integration: what’s new in Europe? Migrants Volunteering: a positive way to talk about migration in Europe? Promoting volunteering among minorities: a renewal of volunteering? a new generation of involvement in Europe?

¹⁴ Involve Project- <http://www.involve-europe.eu>

The topics of employability and intercultural dialogue question both public and non-profit stakeholders. What could be the challenges for volunteering in the years to come? Could we define a New Deal for Voluntary Action?

V. Volunteering , Citizenship , Education and the lifelong learning perspective

The VALUE project and the VAEB project have both been supported by the European Commission under the Lifelong Learning programme. This is not by chance.

5.1 The key role of volunteering in active citizenship

Volunteering is strongly linked to the notion of social inclusion, which is, by definition, based on social participation and civic engagement. Volunteering is a constitutional element in the reproduction of basic civic and democratic structures such as associations, political parties, trade unions, local authorities. Working as a volunteer in those structures should be the first step in being concerned with the social and political issues of a country; in this sense, voluntary participation represents an active appropriation of "democratic ownership", of becoming and being an active citizen

While integration is primarily the role of Member States, governments share this responsibility with civil society notably at the local level where integration measures has been implemented. The key to success is the establishment of micro-level actions based on partnerships between all the many actors who need to be involved: regional and local authorities, political leaders (especially those of the larger towns where many migrants settle), providers of education, healthcare, social welfare, the police, the media, social partners, non-governmental organisations and migrants themselves and their associations.

The Centre for Civil Society (CCS)¹⁵ adopted the following definition to the concept of civil society which: *“refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.”*

Volunteering is a key issue in debates on social cohesion, democracy and civil society. Civil society is seen as a distinct model of social order after the community, market and state. The guiding principle of civil society is its voluntary character, while associations are its dominant collective actors. The prerequisite for taking part in civil society is commitment i.e. the willingness to bind oneself to a common course and to take responsibilities¹⁶. Distinctive traits of civil society are ‘social capital’ and public discourse. Social capital refers to *“features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit”*.¹⁷ Public discourse is the ability of a society to articulate

¹⁵ “What is civil society?”. Centre for Civil Society, London School of Economics (2004-03-01). Source : http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm

¹⁶ Dekker /Van den Broek, 1998

¹⁷ Putnam, 1995

collective values, to reflect upon social problems and to develop political goals¹⁸. The increasing interest in volunteering and voluntary organisations is closely connected to the expectation of bridging the gap between the citizen and the state¹⁹.

Volunteers have been described as “*little platoons*”²⁰ in society: the ones who see before the public authorities what should be improved or changed in society. They make hidden things visible. Migrants and ethnic minorities are often described as “invisible”: their participation should make them visible

Volunteering is a way of acting where the individual engages in collective action for the general good. At a collective level, volunteering is linked to the idea of active citizenship and social participation. At the individual level, volunteers acquire and develop specific skills and competences, which are more and more recognised on the labour market

Volunteering helps to build up social boundaries and social ties. Volunteering is, therefore, an essential resource for social appreciation and social cohesion at the micro and macro levels. The creation of skills and competences, and the development of social capital is very useful in the attempt to overcome informal and institutional barriers of integration and (political, civic) participation, e.g. in combating discrimination, and especially with regard to the appropriation of democratic ownership.

5.2 Volunteering as a part of education and lifelong learning²¹

Volunteering is an important element of lifelong learning; it enables learning processes as well as knowledge transfer. Learning processes may be informal but they are also linked with organisational structures and functions.

Voluntary experience is part of non-formal and informal learning, most valued in the Leonardo da Vinci programmes for lifelong learning as it should contribute to the Lisbon process of March 2000, where the European Union Heads of States and Governments agreed to make the EU “*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010*”.

A very important issue in the lifelong learning process is the acquisition of competences. In a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, of December 2006, on key competences for lifelong learning, it is stated that “*{...} key competences in the shape of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to each context are fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society. They provide added value for the labour market, social cohesion and active citizenship by offering flexibility and adaptability, satisfaction and motivation {...}*”.

Because they should be acquired by everyone, the recommendation proposes a reference tool for the Member States to ensure that these key competences are fully integrated into their strategies and infrastructures, particularly in the context of lifelong learning. The acquisition of key competences “*{...} fits in with the principles of equality and access for all. This*

¹⁸ Wuthnow, 1991

¹⁹ Halba (B), Schumacher (J) and Strümpel (C), Promotion and facilitation of Voluntary work », program Leonardo da Vinci, lead by Isis (Frankfurt and main, Germany), May 2001.

²⁰ Philippe Malaurie in « *Quel statut pour le bénévole/volontaire ?* », iriv, Paris, 1998.

²¹ Halba (B) « Volunteering in the VPL perspective » in *Managing European Diversity in Lifelong Learning*, HAN University, Foundation EC-VPL, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Nijmegen, Vught, Amsterdam, 2007

reference framework also applies in particular to disadvantaged groups whose educational potential requires support. Examples of such groups include people with low basic skills, early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities or migrants, etc. {...}” .

Conclusion – Volunteering and Europe: a combination with a future

The European Year of Volunteering is a challenging opportunity for all the volunteers, associations, public authorities, researchers who have devoted time and energy to enhance volunteering and its contribution to European societies. We have tried to provide some illustrations of several projects that have sought to contribute to these objectives.

Voluntary activities are an essential component of education and lifelong learning. They have contributed a great deal to the construction of Europe as well as to many crucial issues for European societies (environment, culture, sport...). In traditional economic theories, whether Liberal or Marxist, the focus was on the State or the Market; the non-profit sector was largely ignored. However, a lot of economic, social or political activities take place outside the public or private sector. Voluntary activities have developed because of the failure of the State or the Market. Needs were expressed by some groups of the population and no solution was found either by public authorities or commercial structures. The reason often is that the population in need cannot clearly express its demands within the public sector and the private sector initially does not recognise the value, in commercial terms, of such a population. Sometimes innovative ideas proposed by voluntary organisations were also too much in advance to be understood and accepted by the general public.

The main characteristic of the voluntary activities is their reliance on individual initiatives, most of the time through an association or NGO, on a voluntary basis (unpaid). Volunteers freely dedicate their time to defend a cause or/and to be involved in a specific action. The associations representing the voluntary activities are the expression of solidarity on a local and human level. Volunteers are the touchstone in the organisations of the third sector. There is no material compensation for their work: they are not paid for it.

According to David Kennett²² pure altruism is very rare. Most of the time volunteering corresponds to a type of quasi-altruism (six different types of quasi-altruism correspond to “non-material” goals). Consciously or unconsciously, volunteers would expect a reward - this is the Latin “*do ut des*” motto.

Volunteering is also this “Something for nothing” as referred to by Alvin Gouldner. You don’t ask to be rewarded when you decide to be a volunteer. Being useful to others, having the feeling of contributing to the wider community and sharing a common struggle are the main motivations given by volunteers to explain their involvement. This is part of active citizenship and life in society.

Whatever the known or unknown motivation of volunteers, their involvement for others deserves to be valued. This might be one main result emerging from the European Year of Volunteering: thanking volunteers, personally and collectively, for their contribution to Europe’s construction, our common future.

²² Kennett D.A , 1981, quasi-altruism with intangible compensation ; quasi-altruism in the games theory perspective , quasi-altruism in the sociobiological context, quasi-altruism and the Rotten Kid Theorem , quasi-altruism and social pressure , quasi-altruism and sponsorship

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