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Trends and development of volunteering in Europe – The French situation

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I. a) Volunteers in Europe

At CEV (The European Volunteer Centre) we tend to say that more than 100 million people engage in voluntary activities, that is to say 3 out of 10 Europeans are volunteers.

A recent report commissioned by the European Commission's DG "Citizenship" (Study on volunteering in the EU) puts forward a different figure. According to this study there are around 92 to 94 million adults involved in volunteering in the EU, meaning that 22 to 23% of Europeans aged over 15 years are engaged in voluntary work.

In fact nobody knows the precise figure, as European data is based on national surveys and reports, whose parameters vary from country to country.

I. b) Volunteers in France

The last "official" figures on the number of volunteers were released by the INSEE, the National Statistics office as far back as 2002 and counted 12 million volunteers. Other more recent studies put the numbers of volunteers at 14 million.

France Bénévolat has commissioned a survey by IFOP whose results were published last month, the results of this survey were:

- 18 million French people over the age of 15 engage in Voluntary activities.
- 11.3 million people volunteer within voluntary organizations.

- 4.5 million people volunteer in other organizations such as Trade unions, political parties, and religious organizations.
- 7.3 million people volunteer in the community (outside their own family)

Conclusion:

We can draw two general conclusions from the European and French survey results:

1. There is a need for more frequent and more detailed national surveys, as well as common indicators in order to be able to have a comparable overall view of European volunteering.
2. Even these inexact figures tell us that volunteering represents an **important force** that has not yet been given the credit or representation that it deserves.

II a) Trends in the level of Volunteering in Europe

These trends vary between the different member states, but the Commission's study (already quoted) indicates that overall, there has been a general upward trend.

The study explains this by:

- An increased awareness of social and environmental concerns.
- An increase in the number of voluntary organizations.
- A growing number of volunteers needed to support the delivery of public services.

II. b) Trends in the level of Volunteering in France

It follows the same pattern as observed in Europe, for similar reasons. **More importantly, volunteering as a movement has become more evident over the last couple of decades.**

Traditionally in France volunteering has rarely been looked at as a separate concept worthy of attention on its own. It has always been considered as a component, a necessary feature of voluntary organizations. Even the word for volunteering, “*bénévolat*” began to be widely used late in the 1970's and

always with the addition of the word “militant”, as in “militant bénévole” first and then as “bénévole militant”.

In this respect the French volunteering sector differs from other countries (perhaps with the exception of Sweden).

Let me dwell a little on the reasons for this difference, in order to explain this tradition of **low visibility for volunteering**, which essentially affects its level.

1. Volunteering as a Catholic tradition rather than a Protestant one. This is a key factor, illustrated by the different attitudes of Catholics and Protestants towards poverty
2. A different conception of the role of the State, and in consequence what the “corps intermédiares” i.e. civil society is allowed to do or not. We must remember that the French Revolution fought all action undertaken by citizens who were not elected through polls, out of fear that these actions would not promote public good but instead private/corporate interests. Suspicion towards civil society organizations lingered on.
3. Volunteer organizations became legal as late as 1901, when the law regulating Associations (VO) was passed.
4. Volunteering first associated with charity and mutual help, became mainly an act of militancy, carried out within an organization, for a specific cause. People usually joined a voluntary organization for life, just as workers used to work for the same company until retirement age.
5. Thus volunteering and VO were like two sides of the same coin. Unfortunately any progress for volunteers was fought for and obtained by VO, who were seen as the voice of volunteering. There was no separate, independent voice for volunteering as such.
6. Globalization and social changes caught up with France leading to the first volunteer centre being created in the seventies (Centre national du Volontariat - CNV). It did not strive, VO considered it as an alien body and a sign of “americanization” of French Society, just as MacDonald’s was initially not welcomed (it’s quite popular now);
It is symptomatic of the situation, that in 2001, when all over the world

- the International Year of Volunteering was being celebrated it had absolutely no impact in France. Volunteer Organizations ignored it.
7. The CNV folded up in 2003. France Bénévolat succeeded it, backed more wholeheartedly by Government at the time than by the Voluntary Organization Movement. Even today, volunteer centres have to work very hard to be recognized by the very organizations they work with. Trends in society prove their usefulness (baby boomers have reached retirement age, people are more mobile both in their careers and geographically, the economic crisis, youth unemployment entail new motivations for volunteering etc). Little by little the concept of “bénévole” is gaining in visibility, and we hope that the European Year of 2011 will substantially contribute to this.

III. France and Europe share very similar trends in the following areas:

Age:

Adults aged between 30 and 50 show the highest levels of volunteering. In the majority of EU countries, employed people are the category that volunteers the most. Until publication of the latest IFOP survey (which needs confirmation) this seemed to be the case equally for France. But this survey shows a sudden upsurge in volunteering of those aged 65+ : 1 out of every 2 retired French people do volunteer.

Education level:

There is a clear positive correlation between education levels and volunteering both in Europe and in France.

Gender:

Slightly more men (than women) volunteer in Europe. This difference is explained by a stronger representation of men in sports volunteering. In France there are slightly more women than men (56%), as basic volunteers. However, they are under-represented in governing boards and in leadership positions within Voluntary Organizations.

Sectors:

In most EU countries **sports and exercise** attract most volunteers. In France 25% of volunteers are active in this field. Sports is more commonly followed by the following sectors - Social, welfare and health activities, religious organizations, recreation and leisure, education, training and research.

Funding:

The main source of funding for the voluntary sector in Europe is public funds. With the declining funding capacities of the State, this is gradually changing and private funding is becoming more important with a greater emphasis on earned income. France is no exception, but adjustments are more difficult as fundraising, Trusts and Foundations are not as developed here as in countries of an Anglo-Saxon tradition.

Institutional framework:

The EU report on volunteering mentions that only a small number of countries have in place a national strategy for volunteering. Equally, only a small number of countries have in place formal reporting and monitoring arrangements for volunteering. The report concludes that there is a lack of clear and consistent policy on volunteering at national level in most European countries.

In France, the government has organized in 2009 a National Conference of Voluntary Organizations, intending to identify strategical development targets. From the work-groups that prepared this conference, two are still active and concern volunteering.

The first group is working on how to organize better statistical knowledge on volunteering. It is presided over by Edith Archambault, whose work some of you may know. The second work group is presided over by Jean Bastide, president of France Bénévolat.

It is working on the subject of assessment and recognition of skills and competences acquired through volunteering. The group has made an inventory of existing tools and is now trying to sort out the semantics, for example, whether to use the term “capacities” (linked to the person and not to the job) rather than “competences” (linked to the job) or the term “valorization” rather than “validation” etc. Their task is made more difficult, by the fact that they have been asked to identify skills and competences

acquired through volunteering generally, applicable to all sectors of activity. A report has to be delivered fairly soon.

Volunteer Organizations in France hope that The European Year of Volunteering will help develop support policies for volunteering.

Volunteering and the economic crisis

CEV is looking at this issue and preparing a statement on the subject. In France, France Bénévolat organised a seminar on the subject in 2009. The crisis affects volunteering both in a positive and a negative way: it entails opportunities but also challenges.

Opportunities: more qualified people are wanting to volunteer. There is more recognition for certain positive effects of volunteering in terms of employability.

Challenges: multiplication of civic service type schemes, too high expectation set on volunteering, blurring of the concept and tensions with trade unions.

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