



# POLICY PAPER VOLUNTEERING<sup>1</sup>

A recent Eurobarometer survey has shown that at least 3 out of 10 Europeans volunteer and 80% of Europeans say that active participation in society is a crucial part of their life<sup>2</sup>. Whilst volunteering is a well known concept throughout much of Europe, its untapped potential is greater, with 7 out of 10 Europeans *not* volunteering. With increasingly culturally diverse societies there has never been a more important time for Europe's active citizens to show solidarity and promote social cohesion through volunteering. And in the midst of a financial and social crisis, volunteering provides opportunities to put people first, by empowering and developing individuals in an *inclusive* society.

Eurodiaconia is a federation of organisations, institutions and churches providing social and health services and education on a Christian value base in over 20 European countries. Our members provide opportunities to volunteer locally and trans-nationally in social and health services. The belief that all humans are created in the image of God with equal worth and dignity forms the basis for all Eurodiaconia's work. We believe that each person has God given potential and life, regardless of social situation, status, gender or age. Volunteering is one way in which all humans beings can contribute to society and reach their fullest potential.

Eurodiaconia recognises the positive progress made in promoting volunteering through the various initiatives of the European Union such as EVS (European Voluntary Service) and other national volunteer programmes. However, we strongly believe that the European Union must take further action to **develop policy** that would insure a more enabling environment for volunteering. It is time that the value and contribution of volunteers is **recognised** and reflected in the actions taken by the European Union and national governments. And finally, together, we must ensure that **barriers** are removed if we are to see this untapped potential of volunteering fulfilled. This document outlines the reasons why volunteering is a key asset to the work of diaconia and to social Europe and an important factor in its development. The paper also presents Eurodiaconia's recommendations for developing European and national policy to better support and promote volunteering.

# Volunteering and inclusion

Eurodiaconia believes that volunteering plays an important role in promoting **the inclusion and integration of people who are excluded from society**. On one hand volunteers are in particular the main agents when it comes to social inclusion through their engagement with those at risk of social exclusion<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, volunteering provides people that are at risk of being socially excluded with ways to feel useful and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Eurodiaconia defines a volunteer as a person active in an organisation or institution in an unpaid activity, normally for a defined period of time on the basis of an agreement between him/herself and the organisation involved. Volunteering can be occasional or regular, part-time or full time, short and long term. He or she can serve at home or abroad following a free and informed personal decision without compulsion by the state. Volunteers usually serve in projects which promote the common good and which are not for profit. Volunteers are often "invisible", working behind the scenes and often not recognised as "volunteers".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> EYV2011 Alliance discussion paper <a href="http://www.cev.be/data/File/Alliance\_discussion\_paper\_EYV\_2011.pdf">http://www.cev.be/data/File/Alliance\_discussion\_paper\_EYV\_2011.pdf</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> EYV2011 Alliance discussion paper





connected to society such as those who are unemployed, retired and elderly, people with disabilities, migrants and people experiencing poverty. However research in some countries suggests that in reality people who are already socially excluded are less likely to volunteer, therefore focus should be put on engaging socially excluded people in volunteering.

It is important also to highlight that both international volunteering and local volunteering provide opportunities for intercultural learning which is key in the fight against xenophobia, racism and discrimination and building more cohesive societies. However, discrimination, discouraging legal provisions, absence of legal status, and visa barriers to non EU citizens are obstacles that must be removed if we want to facilitate *inclusive* volunteering.

Furthermore, the definition and legal status of volunteers can vary from country to country and there is often no framework clarifying their rights and responsibilities and legislation at European or national level which may have the inadvertent effect of restricting certain people from taking part in voluntary activities locally such as asylum seekers. Although we would like to see more Europeans volunteering locally, Eurodiaconia would also like to ensure that people from outside the EU wishing to volunteer may obtain visas to participate in international volunteering programmes and activities.

## **Active citizenship**

Eurodiaconia believes that volunteering is a key expression of **active citizenship** and that the EU should support its active citizens who put European values of solidarity and social cohesion into practice day after day. By engaging in their communities without motivation for financial gain for the benefit of other individuals and the society as a whole, volunteers are putting into practice the European value of solidarity and in doing so; help build a European identity as they engage for the same values throughout Europe.

Volunteering also encourages **participatory democracy** in that those engaged in volunteering are directly or indirectly working to improve society for all at a local, regional and national level. Voluntary activity facilitates the involvement of local actors who become empowered through participation, involvement and action. It is a means by which citizens detect, voice and respond to needs arising in society and therefore deserves better recognition, promotion and facilitation. Lack of information available to citizens about the possibilities and benefits of volunteering and the feeling of not being able to 'afford' to volunteer because of a lack of work/ family life balance should not be an obstacle for being getting involved.

# **Personal Development**

Volunteering can also be a tool of **empowerment** by providing a platform for getting people back into education or employment and in general, tapping into people's potential. Volunteering activities are part of **informal and non-formal learning** for people at all ages and at all stages of their lives. It contributes to personal development and to learning life skills and competences, enlarging social contacts, building self-esteem and in doing so, **enhancing employability** which when it leads to quality work, can help bring people out poverty and social exclusion. Eurodiaconia believes that volunteering contributes to EU goals of a more competitive labour market by providing **lifelong learning** opportunities. The concept of empowerment also links to our biblical and diaconal understanding of creation by ensuring that each person can respond to the God given call to care for creation<sup>4</sup>. Empowerment further refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals. It often involves people developing confidence in their own capacities, to build self-esteem and facilitate people to discover and use their own capacities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Diaconal Identity - Faith in Social Care, Eurodiaconia, <a href="http://www.eurodiaconia.org/images/stories/Publications/Diaconal\_Identity-Faith\_in\_Social\_Care">http://www.eurodiaconia.org/images/stories/Publications/Diaconal\_Identity-Faith\_in\_Social\_Care</a> - FINAL\_May 2010.pdf





However, in some cases, discouraging legal provisions mean that job seekers are prevented from engaging in voluntary activities. Furthermore, skills acquired in volunteering as well as non formal education programmes need to be better recognized including the personal, cultural or social competences they have gained and the value of those skills for employability. The need for these soft skills is as important as gaining highly specialised skills, and attaining a balance. **Recognition** of volunteering can also play a big part in rewarding existing volunteers for their engagement in voluntary activities and in attracting new volunteers. Eurodiaconia believes that the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNFIL) provides important opportunities to recognise the skills and competences of volunteers and to bridge the gap between volunteering and education.

For volunteering to provide effective learning opportunities, volunteer leaders need to be aware of their capacity to facilitate the personal development of the volunteer. Volunteers require various aspects of support which may differ from paid staff, including training, supervision, evaluation, an explanation of the framework they are working in, and a clear set of tasks. Therefore financial means must be made available to manage volunteers effectively and professionally.

### Community and wellbeing

Eurodiaconia firmly believes that volunteers can improve the quality of social and health services. Not only can they benefit the user, they also benefit the paid staff and the community they serve. Volunteers have an important role to play in bringing **ownership of the services** by the community. They can provide care that is **user-focused**, **holistic and responsive** to the community's needs. Former patients can also provide a user voice and expertise for example. Local volunteers can help build **community cohesion** as they bring innovative perspectives to the service and can provide a source of local knowledge about the community. Volunteering is also an invitation to participate in and improve the life of the community, whereby people become active partners in community development. Volunteering should be a power for good and for positive change in local communities and beyond. Therefore it is important that volunteers are not coerced into acts of violence or discrimination or actively participate for causes that result in more harm than good to society.

Not only does volunteering benefit the recipient and community, volunteering is known to improve the **health** and wellbeing of the volunteer<sup>5</sup> with reported higher levels of happiness, life-satisfaction, self-esteem, a sense of control over life, and physical health, as well as lower levels of depression. In particular, volunteering provides a means to foster active ageing, not only through serving the elderly, but as retired or elderly people themselves volunteer they may stay healthy and active for longer<sup>6</sup> with reported better health in later years. Volunteering can provide retired or elderly people opportunities to contribute to and feel part of society which may be lost once they are no longer active in the labour market. Volunteering can also help tackle demographic change and build **intergenerational solidarity** by creating links between young, middle and older generations and the promotion of mutual cooperation and interchanges between the generations.

#### **Economic value**

Eurodiaconia would also like to draw attention to the important **economic contribution** of volunteering. The Comparative Non-Profit Sector project<sup>7</sup> revealed that the voluntary sector contributes to an estimated 2-7% to the GDP of our national economies. However, in many cases, diaconal organisations providing social services are only part-funded by the state, and where government funding remains static or is decreasing, increased demands for services means that our members are increasingly dependent on volunteers, and in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'The contribution of volunteering to Economic and Social Cohesion' <a href="http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:105:0011:0015:EN:PDF">http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2008:105:0011:0015:EN:PDF</a>
<a href="http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07\_0506">http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07\_0506</a> <a href="http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07\_0506">hbr.pdf</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/index.php?section=content&view=9&sub=3&tri=8





many cases, services provided are only possible *because* of the reliability and commitment of volunteers. Eurodiaconia would therefore like to stress the importance of supporting volunteering as an integral part of **the sustainability of the social and health services**. Diaconal organisations should include volunteering into their strategic planning and should constantly be reflecting on how to recruit new volunteers and how to retain current volunteers.

However, recognising the economic contribution of volunteering, we must also recognise the risk that volunteers can be abused for cheap labour and replace paid staff. Volunteering should **not be used as a form of job substitution** to help run services cheaply. Funding and commissioning authorities must ensure the resources to avoid this. Furthermore, good management of volunteers requires giving quality training, professional supervision and guidance which cost time and resources and which should be distinguished between that of paid staff. It is also essential for managers to ensure a balance of paid staff and volunteers.

### Holistic approach

For many volunteers in diaconia, their motivation can go beyond wanting to gain useful work experience and do something for the common good: they are often motivated by the unique approach of diaconal care. One of the most obvious characteristics of the **diaconal service identity** is that of care for the individual and that our care giving is guided by a holistic, person-oriented approach. Diaconal service organizations are not alone in having a person orientated, holistic approach but for diaconal service providers the **spiritual needs** of the individual are as important as any other need and the approach to the user is defined by the characteristics of diaconal identity.

Whether professionals, deacons or volunteers, *people* are at the core of diaconia and are an invaluable human resource. In the same way as a diaconal employee is motivated by their love for Christ and their desire to serve God by caring for his creation, diaconia provides *all* people with opportunities to serve those in need and thus connect back to the tradition of concrete actions in favour of the poor and the marginalized (the Greek word 'Diakonia')<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, diaconal work, whether carried out by volunteers or paid staff means providing services and support from a diaconal perspective, based on a Christian faith. It is this faith that motivates and guides diaconal agents in actions and which gives them their unique identity, motivation and energy!

# What is the next step?

People choose to volunteer for various reasons, but most do so simply because they personally want to make a difference and contribute to a common good. This may be more common than a strategically orientated decision to contribute to social cohesion or active citizenship. Whatever their motivation, the benefits of their actions to all society are enormous. However, to truly tap into the resources of our society and to reap the benefits of volunteering, **barriers must be removed** and the EU and national governments must make a commitment to recognize, support and promote volunteering.

#### Therefore Eurodiaconia calls for:

The EU, national and local governments to recognise the contribution that volunteering makes to the social and health care sector and national and local governments to raise awareness of the contribution of volunteering to reducing social and health inequalities in order to increase the number of people who engage in voluntary activities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Diaconal Identity - Faith in Social Care, Eurodiaconia, <a href="http://www.eurodiaconia.org/images/stories/Publications/Diaconal\_Identity-Faith\_in\_Social\_Care">http://www.eurodiaconia.org/images/stories/Publications/Diaconal\_Identity-Faith\_in\_Social\_Care</a> - FINAL May 2010.pdf





- National and local governments to work towards the creation of an enabling environment for volunteering through stronger mechanisms at EU level and national level to support organisations and infrastructures that give opportunities to volunteers. This should include the adoption of an EU-wide favourable legal environment for volunteers, including the right of all citizens and residents to volunteer, regardless of their social or legal status.
- Members States to identify and eliminate, in their laws and practice, any obstacles which directly or indirectly prevent people from engaging in voluntary action, and to reduce tax pressure which penalises voluntary action and give voluntary workers legal status and adequate social protection while respecting their independence, and removing financial obstacles to volunteering (as in 2001 Council of Europe Recommendation)
- The EU to mainstream volunteering in EU policy by developing strategies to promote, recognise and support voluntary activities in Europe. There are now a wide variety of initiatives in the field of volunteering in DG EAC, EMPL, and also ENV and ECHO. There should be an ongoing inter-service consultation and exchange to tap into synergies between different initiatives.
- The European Commission to start to work on a White Paper on volunteering and active citizenship.
- The EU and Member States should disseminate good practices in the area of VNFIL (validation of nonformal and informal learning), highlighting the need for its application to voluntary experience.
- A better peer exchange of Member States and within the Commission with ongoing direct exchange between Member States in the field of volunteering. In particular we would like to see the social OMC used for ongoing exchange and benchmarking, to allow national governments to compare their policies and to exchange their experiences in promoting volunteer friendly policies.
- More European based research to be carried out on the wellbeing and health benefits of volunteering

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