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Subject: The role of voluntary activities in social policy
- Council Conclusions

Delegations will find attached the final version of the Council conclusions as adopted by EPSCO on 3 October 2011.

The role of voluntary activities in social policy

Council Conclusions

The Council of the European Union,

Considering that:

1. Having due regard to the particularities of the situation in each Member State and all forms of volunteering, the term "voluntary activities" refers to all types of voluntary activities, whether formal, non-formal or informal which are undertaken of a person's own free will, choice and motivation, and is without concern for financial gain. They benefit the individual volunteer, communities and society as a whole. They are also an instrument for individuals and associations to address human, social, intergenerational or environmental needs and concerns, and are often carried out in support of a non-profit organisation or community-based initiative;
2. Voluntary activities need to be clearly distinguished from paid employment and should by no means replace it¹. They should not perpetuate gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work and may not encourage employee's reduction of working time or withdrawal from the labour market;
3. Voluntary activities can not replace the overall responsibility of the state to ensure and provide economic, social and cultural rights;

¹ Resolution of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 16 May 2007 on implementing the common objectives for voluntary activities of young people, OJ C 241, 20.9.2008, p. 1.

4. To ensure rule of law and the full respect for the integrity of the individual, voluntary activities must be subjected to existing legislation and fully respect the universal and fundamental rights and freedoms;
5. Voluntary activities are transversal, multi-dimensional and have potential significance for many policies, in particular: employment and social policy, equal opportunities, social care, education and youth, cultural policy, regional policy, research and development, sport and health policy, environmental protection, consumer's interests, civil protection, humanitarian aid and development policy including their external dimensions;
6. Volunteering can create opportunities for learning, and engaging in voluntary activities provides citizens with new skills and strengthens their sense of belonging to the society and can be a catalyst for social change;
7. Voluntary activities can contribute to the growth and strengthening of social capital through development of a social network based on trust and cooperation and by encouraging behavioural attitudes based on engagement for the common good;
8. Voluntary activities can contribute to the development of active citizenship, democracy, social cohesion and therewith to implementation of the basic values and principles of the European Union, namely: solidarity, sustainable development, human dignity, equality and subsidiarity, thus promoting European identity;
9. Volunteering, as an expression of active citizenship, takes place in all areas of social life contributing e.g. to combating poverty and social exclusion, improving the situation of vulnerable groups, strengthening social integration and supporting active and dignified ageing, solidarity between generations as well as to economic growth;

10. Promotion of voluntary activities is also an overall objective of the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (2011)², and a prioritised field of action in the renewed framework of European cooperation in the youth field 2010-2018³. The Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU supports mobility of young volunteers⁴;
11. Promotion of voluntary activities can play a role in the implementation of the initiatives of the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations (2012)⁵ and is in line with the objectives of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010)⁶ at once constituting an overarching element of those two actions and helping consolidate their results;
12. Volunteering can contribute to the achievement of the "Europe 2020" strategy objectives by supporting social inclusion and learning as well as through activities enhancing employability;
13. There exist barriers limiting voluntary activities and the full use of their potential, including:
 - Unequally supportive conditions for developing voluntary activities at local, regional and national level, inter alia rights and responsibilities of volunteers and their organisations,
 - Undervaluing of voluntary activities,

² Council Decision of 27 November 2009 on the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship (2011) (2010/37/EC). See also COM(2011) 568 final.

³ Council Resolution of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018) (OJ C311, 19/12/09).

⁴ Council Recommendation on the Mobility of Young Volunteers across the EU of 20 November 2008 (2008/C 319/03).

⁵ COM(2010) 462 final.

⁶ Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2008 on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010) (1098/2008/EC).

- Lack of accessible information on voluntary activities, their value, possibilities and importance for individuals and the society;

The Council underlines the importance of voluntary activities:

14. For the strengthening of civil society, activating citizens (including those from vulnerable groups), social cohesion, solidarity between generations, inter-cultural dialogue, improvement of social skills and professional qualifications and key competences, fostering personal development, addressing gender inequalities, reducing existing social barriers, intolerance and all forms of discrimination;
15. For the integration among European nations and the sharing of EU values beyond EU borders and promoting European identity;
16. For enhancing competences and supporting the career paths of young people, which can improve their opportunities on the labour market, among others by improving their social skills. Equally, volunteering activities cannot replace the value of formal education or experience of work in this respect;
17. For acquiring competences, achieving social inclusion, improving the capacities and well-being of older people and for benefiting from their knowledge, skills and experience;
18. For enhancing competences and improving skills of vulnerable groups which might be also involved in volunteering and thus benefit from better social inclusion;
19. As a factor for developing sport and physical activity at the level which is closest to the citizens;

The Council therefore invites the Member States and the European Commission to take the following actions within the framework of their competences and in compliance with the subsidiarity principle, given their institutional structure:

20. Take into account these conclusions in the implementation of the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy and its flagship initiatives;
21. Promote cooperation on the development of voluntary activities within the European Union and in the European Neighbourhood Policy countries. This may be achieved through volunteer exchange programmes between the European Union and the European Neighbourhood Policy countries, as well as through support to voluntary organisations;
22. Encourage collaboration, joint projects and sharing of experience and good practices among the different levels of public authorities, including at European level, among those involved in social, economic, cultural, educational and youth work⁷;
23. Support the development of civil society organisations (as key promoters of voluntary activities) at local, regional, national and European levels and their cooperation at European level, have a continuous dialogue with civil society and promote training of volunteers and organisations involving volunteers;
24. Consider encouraging production, publishing and sharing of research tools/methodologies and results concerning voluntary activities and active citizenship, along with statistical data including studies on the impact of voluntary activities on the economic and social condition of the Member States and social well-being, also taking into account the gender dimension;

⁷ From the Council conclusions on the role of culture in combating poverty and social exclusion (15448/10).

25. Promote the role of volunteering as a form of non-formal and informal learning contributing to obtaining new skills and competences and improved employability in each and every age and social group;
26. Promote the visibility and recognition of competences gained through voluntary activities by means of instruments such as Europass and in particular the forthcoming skills passport and Youthpass;
27. Support short term volunteering initiatives which people may find easier to combine with paid employment and their family life as well as encourage solutions which promote the transition from occasional volunteering to longer-term voluntary activities;
28. Mobilize the potential of people experiencing exclusion, who can be active citizens through voluntary activities that increase their sense of efficacy and change the stereotypical image in society which reduces them to aid beneficiaries;
29. Promote e-volunteering as an innovative form of voluntary activities, which is a positive aspect of the virtual activity of internet users;
30. Promote favourable conditions for developing voluntary activities using instruments which may prove necessary, including strategies for the promotion and development of voluntary activities;
31. Encourage companies and other private-sector operators to support initiatives promoting and enhancing volunteering in the context of employee volunteering⁸;

⁸ European Parliament resolution of 22 April 2008 on the role of volunteering in contributing to economic and social cohesion (2007/2149(INI)) (2009/C 259 E/02).

32. Strive to ensure that the development of voluntary activities become a part of future EU programmes on social policy, education, youth, citizenship, culture and sport, without prejudice to negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework;
33. Ensure that any action developed at EU level concerning the mobility of volunteers is in line with the European Quality Charter for Mobility⁹;

The Council invites the European Commission to:

34. Consider where appropriate the development of voluntary activities in programmes implemented under the Cohesion Policy;
35. Explore the possibilities which would allow voluntary activities to contribute to projects subsidised from EU funds and develop mechanisms to allow for appropriate appraisal of voluntary activities;
36. Consider the scope for deepening discourse on the role of voluntary activities as an important element for further development of volunteering in the European Union;
37. Analyse the system of existing indicators concerning voluntary activities and their role in relevant EU policies, taking into account the gender dimension, and consider where appropriate to look for statistical tools, e.g. the ILO Manual on the Measurement of volunteer work, to ensure comparable data and indicate, where appropriate, current or new areas of voluntary activities which require closer cooperation within the EU;

⁹ Recommendation (EC) No 2006/961 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on transnational mobility within the Community for education and training purposes: European Quality Charter for Mobility [Official Journal L 394 of 30.12.2006].

38. Disseminate, where appropriate, any results of the dialogue with the civil society platforms, which are relevant for the promotion of voluntary activities;
 39. Ensure that subsidiarity is preserved in the Member States' definition of the scope of voluntary activities, particularly in the civil protection field.
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