EU holds conference to help finetune its first programme for EU Aid Volunteers.

The European Commission held a one and a half-day conference on 10 and 11 September in Brussels to gather lessons learnt, advice and opinions from volunteers and volunteer organisations following a four-year test phase to help finetune a new EU programme to send volunteers to work on humanitarian aid missions.

Monique Pariat, Director General of the European Commission’s DG ECHO, welcomed the volunteers and volunteer organisations attending the conference.

“You are our pioneers. We are proud of you and happy to hear about your experience and stories,” she said.
Around 300 EU aid volunteers took part in the test phase of the programme over a four year period. Young and experienced volunteers were sent to various countries in the world to work on projects.

The overall aim is for volunteers to work with local people in developing countries so that they can manage projects to, for example, minimise loss of life and damage to housing and public infrastructure in the event of natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes.

Volunteers went to these countries for a shorter period of a few weeks or for a longer period of six to nine months. The volunteers were not deployed in conflict areas for safety reasons. The volunteers received training before they travelled to the country where they worked as a volunteer.

For volunteers, their work is primarily to pass on their expertise to other countries but it can also be a professional opportunity allowing them to develop their careers.

One of the key aspects of the volunteering programme is that sending and hosting organisations will have to be officially certified by the EU to ensure high standards of quality. The EU will not give its approval for a volunteer to be sent to a developing country until a volunteering organisation has been certified.
Lessons learnt from the test phase

Volunteers and volunteer organisations described their experience of projects and what they found worked well and did not work. One lesson learnt by one volunteering organisation was that a volunteering organisation or a volunteer should not force their skills or knowledge on another organisation but should first understand what exists before recommending changes. Another volunteering organisation pointed out that there was an argument against using volunteers in that hosting organisations have to find the time to accompany volunteers but that this was outweighed by the fact that the volunteers are all eager to learn and very motivated.

A number of interesting points were raised during sessions where groups of volunteers discussed different aspects of volunteering. One group pointed out that, after returning home, there can be some difficulties reintegrating into society. The same group suggested that there could be a handover period from one volunteer to the next one to ensure that the experience of the previous volunteer is passed onto the new volunteer.

Another group said that a key challenge is how to keep communities and volunteers active even if there is no obvious immediate threat of a natural disaster. For example, in Grenada there was a big disaster 50 years or so ago but then nothing happened and people became complacent. Then there was a devastating hurricane. Developing volunteer systems was one idea put forward by the group to help prevent this kind of problem.

One volunteering organisation stressed the importance of kitting out volunteers with uniforms. “It is key to have volunteers kitted out with a uniform so that they can be identified as representing the disaster management agency if something happens,” he said.

Volunteer organisations also discussed issues that needed to be carefully considered when volunteers go to developing countries to work on projects. For a project in Grenada, these include the differences in cultures between where volunteers come from and where they are sent; the different food in the Caribbean; the hot weather.
Finding out about volunteering projects

Volunteers returning from projects abroad often stay in contact with the communities that they have left and continue working with them. Partly to help past volunteers exchange experience with each other and to help potential volunteers find out more about volunteering, the Commission is in the process of setting up an online platform that may contain interactive maps of where projects are, written stories and videos about ongoing projects. The plan is for the platform to include an online volunteering database that will be in place in spring 2016.

Commission supporting and encouraging volunteers

In a speech during the conference, Christos Stylianides, the EU Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, pointed out that humanitarian needs are growing dramatically and that the number of displaced people is at its highest since World War Two. Under the pilot phase of EU Aid Volunteers nearly 300 volunteers have worked in a wide range of humanitarian projects, for example to support refugees and displaced people and working on better preparedness via mapping projects.

“We appreciate your commitment and enthusiasm,” he said to the volunteers and volunteering organisations.

He also urged volunteer organisations to achieve higher standards of volunteering and to build new partnerships.

The first volunteer vacancies will be published in spring 2016, giving potential volunteers the opportunity to use their expertise in challenging and rewarding projects in countries across the world.

Group breakout session.
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