

## 4.1 Volunteering in the European Union: An Overview of National Differences in the EU Member States

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The coach of the boys' football team in the local sports club, the women visiting patients in the hospital, or the pensioner who explains the history of a city's church to visitors – all have something in common: they are volunteers. We find them everywhere: in London and Lisbon, in Athens and Amsterdam. The European Year of Volunteering for the Promotion of Active Citizenship 2011 brings these volunteers into the limelight. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, 30 per cent of all Europeans declare that they volunteer in an organisation or are participating actively in an organisation (European Commission, 2010: 171). A closer look at the data classified by country reveals great differences: in the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark more than 50 per cent declare that they are engaged in volunteer activities; in contrast, less than 20 per cent of the Portuguese and the Bulgarians identified themselves as volunteers.

But national differences go beyond 'raw numbers' of volunteers: in the European Union, different traditions and different definitions of volunteering can be identified. As a result we find different approaches in national policies on volunteering. Furthermore, this article highlights the relationship between volunteering and families. But before taking a closer look at these aspects, we have to clarify what we mean by "volunteering".

### 1. Different definitions and understandings of volunteering

This question is easier to ask than to answer. Apart from the English word 'volunteering', other languages use different terms for voluntary activities with different connotations. The Germans speak of *ehrenamtliches Engagement*: this describes for instance volunteering as the chairperson of the local sports club or being a member of the city council. Another common German term is *bürgerschaftliches Engagement* (civic engagement) which highlights the idea of volunteers as active citizens but refers at the same time to all kinds of voluntary activities. In French, two different terms are known: *bénévolat* and *volontariat*. In France, *volontariat* refers to voluntary services; *bénévolat* describes individual voluntary activities for the benefit of the society (and not for family and friends) (GHK, 2010: 52). In Belgium, both terms are synonymous, but the 2005 law on volunteering uses only the word *volontariat* (GHK, 2010: 51).

Besides the use of the different terms with their special connotations, one must consider the different kinds of activities that can be subsumed under 'volunteering': is donating money volunteering? What about watering the plants of your holidaying neighbour or shopping for your grandmother? Does being a member of an association qualify you as a volunteer? Does volunteering only take place in the framework of an organisation or project (i.e. formal voluntary activities) or do spontaneous or unorganised voluntary activities (i.e. informal or non-formal voluntary activities) count as well?

Neither academics nor practitioners have one clear-cut answer: a variety of definitions exist, suited to different (national) contexts and purposes. The *Study on Volunteering in the European Union* (GHK, 2010: 49ff.) provides a good overview of the different definitions used by international organisations and in the different European Member States<sup>1</sup>. A current definition of volunteering can be found in the Decision of the European Council Decision on the European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship 2011<sup>2</sup>:

*"(...) the term 'voluntary activities' refers to all types of voluntary activity, 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"<sup>3</sup>.*

To agree on one concrete definition might not be necessary for every discussion, as the term 'voluntary activities' can refer to a broad range of activities. National differences have to be taken into account, however, especially in an international or European context. In Germany and France for example, informal volunteering is not included in the general understanding of volunteering. In contrast, in Austria informal volunteering, for example neighbourly help, is perceived as volunteering. The Swiss additionally include monetary and non-monetary donations in their concept of voluntary activities (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2009)). The term volunteering in the Netherlands also refers to political participation and caring for young children and (elderly) relatives (Vogelwiesche/Sporket, 2008: 11).

<sup>1</sup> Funded by the European Commission, this study provides a good overview of the situation of volunteering in the European Union. It consists of country reports for every EU member state, a comparative summary of all results, and special reports on volunteering in the field of sport in the European Union. The study is available online at: [http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/news/news1015\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/news/news1015_en.htm).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:017:0043:0049:EN:PDF>.

<sup>3</sup> The decision does not make clear why both non-formal or informal voluntary activities are mentioned or what the difference is between these two terms. It is more common to use non-formal and informal voluntary activities as synonyms.

Special circumstances have to be considered for the post-communist EU Member States in Central and Eastern Europe. New voluntary associations had to be founded after democratisation. The citizens of these countries had to develop a new attitude towards volunteering because during Communist rule membership in youth organisations or participation in political festivities or demonstrations was mandatory rather than really voluntary (Zimmer/Priller, 2004; GHK, 2010: 48).

## 2. How many volunteers are there and what do they do?

The Study on Volunteering in the EU (GHK, 2010) pooled national studies on volunteering to analyse how many people volunteer in the EU. However, due to different methods and definitions of volunteering applied in the national surveys it is not possible to arrive at a precise number. The authors of the study concluded that 92 to 94 million adults in the EU are volunteers. That means that 22-23 per cent of all EU citizens aged over 15 are involved in voluntary work<sup>4</sup>.

According to the Study on Volunteering in the EU, countries with a very high level of volunteering are Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK. In contrast, less than 10 per cent of adults volunteer in Bulgaria, Greece and Lithuania (GHK, 2010: 5ff.)<sup>5</sup>. In order to assess these different levels of volunteering it should be taken into account that in some countries, such as Greece, it is more common to dedicate one's free time to helping families or friends rather than to be a formal volunteer within an organisation. But most surveys on volunteering focus on formal volunteering in the framework of an organisation or a project (Angermann/ Sittermann, 2010: 10).

The most common fields European volunteers are engaged in are "sport/recreation/leisure", "culture and arts", "education and research", "social activities/social services", and "health". Again there are national differences, for example in Lithuania over half of the voluntary organisations (55 per cent) are active in the social service and healthcare sector. In Bulgaria, Ireland, Spain and Portugal, social services also account for the majority of volunteers. Sport is the sector with most volunteers in Belgium, Germany, Finland, France, the Netherlands and Latvia (GHK, 2010: 280ff.). What do volunteers do? The study identified six main fields of activity: "administrative and supporting tasks", "helping or working directly with people", "preparing and supporting voluntary activities", "managerial and coordination tasks", "campaigning and lobbying" and "organisation of events" (GHK 2010: 89).

<sup>4</sup> The discrepancy in relation to the Eurobarometer survey mentioned above can possibly be explained by the fact that the Eurobarometer study question asks about both volunteering and participation in an organisation. It would be desirable to conduct a comprehensive study on volunteering in the EU to finally have exact data on the level of volunteering in the EU.

<sup>5</sup> For a full overview of the situation in all EU countries, see GHK (2010: 60ff).

### 3. Volunteering by and for families

The activities of many volunteers revolve around families and children. Research on volunteering has rarely paid special attention to families who benefit from the voluntary work of others but at the same time are active as volunteers themselves. A German report published in 2009 looked more closely at volunteering by and for families. The authors analysed different studies and data available for the situation in Germany (*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*, 2009).

According to their data, 40 per cent of all volunteer work is dedicated to families or children and young people. Most volunteers working with children and families are active in the sports sector. Here, every other volunteer from the sports sector declared that he or she is engaged in working with families and young people. Other sectors in Germany characterised by volunteers working for families are "church/religion" (33.4 per cent of all volunteers in this field), "recreation and leisure" (29 per cent, e.g. accompanying children and youth travel tours) and "culture and music" (20.8 per cent, e.g. conducting a youth choir) (*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*, 2009: 100).

Besides benefiting from formal volunteering within organisation, families also benefit from informal volunteering. The extent of this support has not yet been quantified, according to the authors of the study. However, unpaid support by family members, neighbours and friends is a relevant resource for families, especially in terms of child-minding. Data from 2005 suggests that 13 per cent of working mothers and fathers rely on relatives, friends, and neighbours to mind their children. The results of the German Volunteer Survey (2005) demonstrate the extent of family networks: 78 per cent of all households with children aged up to seven can count on the support of relatives, 52 per cent on the support of friends, and 34 per cent on the support of neighbours. (*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*, 2009: 110).

Naturally, families contribute to these informal networks as well. But besides this informal engagement, they are also volunteers in more formal settings. In fact, figures from Germany show that the level of volunteering among adults living with children is significantly higher than the average level of volunteering, though this does not apply to single parents (*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*, 2009: 102). The voluntary activities of these parents are to a high degree linked to their own children: three-quarters of all volunteering women state that their volunteering is directly connected to their own children (*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*, 2009: 103). Their activities revolve around child care facili-

ties, their children's schools or leisure time activities, such as sports clubs. Parents volunteer as members of the parents' council, or they organise festivities or contribute their handcraft skills (*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*, 2009: 118). In Germany, more women than men volunteer in the fields relevant for families and children (*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*, 2009: 144).

As volunteers, parents can become role models for their children. Though not yet well researched, the few existing sources on this suggest that children imitate their parents' attitude towards volunteering and eventually become volunteers themselves (*Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung*, 2009: 102).

#### **4. Public policies on volunteering**

Different national traditions are reflected in the way public policies on volunteering have developed. Volunteering is an established, though not always prominent field of policy in many countries. Spain and Belgium have, for example, laws that define volunteering; France, Sweden and England, on the other hand, intentionally have no special legal framework for volunteering. Responsibility for volunteering lies not just at the national level but at sub-national level as well, in Germany, Belgium and Spain, where all autonomous regions have their own laws on volunteering. In the United Kingdom, the governments of Wales and Scotland are in charge of volunteering, but there is no policy for the whole of the UK (Angermann/Sittermann, 2010; GHK, 2010: 10). In England, the responsibility for volunteering lies with the Office for Civil Society (part of the British Cabinet Office). England is an interesting example for public policy on volunteering, as the change of government in 2010 led to a change in the policy on volunteering. Whereas the former Labour government focused on the promotion of volunteering by engaging with existing large voluntary organisations, the new coalition government emphasises the promotion of grassroots movements at local level. Their stated aim is to enable communities to initiate their own volunteer groups and projects. Another new programme in England is the National Citizen Service, which will start in summer 2011. This will be a (non-mandatory) voluntary service for 16-year-olds, who will use their summer holidays to develop a social project in their local community and put it into practice (Sittermann, 2011).

Some countries in the European Union have developed special strategies for their policies on volunteering. In Germany for instance, the government adopted a national strategy on volunteering in October 2010, which is the basis for the further development of the national policy on volunteering

(Angermann/Sittermann, 2010: 2). In Spain, the Fourth State Plan on Volunteering was to be implemented in 2010. The Spanish state's plans bring together different actors such as policy makers, representatives of voluntary organisations and experts on volunteering who work for the further promotion of volunteering (Sittermann, 2011).

The aim of public policies on volunteering is in general the promotion and facilitation of volunteering. One issue for volunteering policy is to make sure that volunteers have health, accident and liability insurance. Despite national differences on volunteering, one aspect is of relevance to all countries: acknowledgment and recognition of volunteers and their work. One common means of doing this is issuing volunteers with bonus cards which give them certain benefits, such as free access to museums. Additionally, several awards have been created to acknowledge voluntary activities. Examples are the Europe for Citizens Programme Golden Star Awards or the British Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. These awards place volunteers in the limelight, but general acknowledgement of voluntary work should exist beyond these brief moments and beyond the European Year of Volunteering 2011. This cannot be achieved by public policies alone, but requires an effort from everyone: when was the last time you thanked a volunteer - maybe the volunteer who issues the books in your local library or the voluntary firemen and women in your home town?

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