

## Volunteering in the EU contributes to a better society

2011 has been designated the European Year of Volunteering (EYV) in order to draw public attention to volunteering. The importance of volunteering has long been acknowledged by the EU and now the EYV 2011 aims to inform the general public about the benefits of volunteering. The year will foster an understanding for the importance of volunteering in creating a more democratic, caring and responsible society<sup>1</sup>. Its main aims are:

- promoting volunteering amongst European citizens
- supporting and reinforcing European volunteering organisations
- improving the recognition of voluntary work and the challenges it is facing
- celebrating the commitment of millions of European volunteers, who devote themselves to supporting people, causes or communities, both within the EU and abroad

## Benefits of volunteering

Volunteering in the EU makes a significant contribution to the development of the economy, society and the individual. Estimates suggest that volunteering contributes from 0.5% to more than 5% of the GDP of EU countries. Volunteering has an important impact on society, because volunteering is a tangible expression of active citizenship that strengthens some of our core European values: solidarity and social

cohesion. Volunteering is also a learning opportunity for the individual that can help develop their potential and improve their self-esteem, while reducing the risk of social isolation.

## Types of voluntary activities

Voluntary activities take place in many different sectors. In over half of the EU countries most volunteers are active in the field of sports, exercise and outdoor activities. Other popular areas are social-welfare and health, charity and religious organisations, cultural organisations, recreation and leisure, educational organisations, training and research.

## Level of volunteering in the EU

Although around 23% of Europeans aged over 15 years are engaged in voluntary work, the statistics also suggest that there are big differences in the level of volunteering between the EU's member countries. However, each country has a different definition of volunteering, and of how to measure it, so that international comparisons are very difficult to carry out. There is a lack of internationally comparable data in volunteering. That said, over the past 10 years, there has been a general trend increase in the number of active volunteers and voluntary organisations in the EU.

## Legal framework <sup>2</sup>

There are no EU-wide laws specifically on volunteering, primarily because of the diverse nature of volunteering and the complexity and diversity of the voluntary sector across the EU

<sup>1</sup> Source: European Commission-DG EAC, 2010. *Volunteering in the European Union*. Final report. London: GHK

<sup>2</sup> VEU Final Report, p. 110

member states. The current situation is as follows:

1. member states with a legal framework specifically related to volunteering: BE, CY, CZ, HU, IT, LV, LU, MT, PL, PT, RO, ES
2. member states with no legal framework but where volunteering is regulated by or within other existing general laws: AT, DK, EE, FI, FR, DE, GR, IE, LT, NL, SE, UK
3. member states in the process of developing a legal framework: BG, SK and SI

### Challenges to volunteering

Despite the countless benefits volunteering, there are also many challenges for the voluntary sector across the EU. Some of them are:

- the confusing legal and regulatory framework and lack of uniformity of treatment across the EU;
- the lack of monitoring and information on volunteering, data collection and research;
- the lack of official recognition or validation of voluntary work and experiences;
- the problem with perceptions of volunteering by the general public in some countries;
- the need for sustainable funding in the voluntary sector, especially as many countries are drastically cutting back public expenditure, a traditional source of funding for volunteering organisations

### Recommendations in the area of volunteering

Recommendations at the EU level and the awareness campaign of the EYV 2011 will help civil society and governments face these challenges, and start the work for necessary,

beneficial change. Countries will be examining where it may be necessary to revise laws or enact separate legislation in order to promote volunteering, protect volunteers and remove superfluous legal impediments.

Policy makers will be encouraged to take into account the specificity of Voluntary activities which distinguish them from for-profit activities when it comes to laws on the reimbursements of volunteers' expenses, the protection of volunteers while they are performing voluntary activity (e.g. insurance coverage), treatment of NGOs in public calls for tender and the distribution of grants, and the facilitation of international volunteering. Countries with a well-defined legal structure concerning volunteering, such as Belgium or Poland, could be taken as a positive example towards the improvement of the conditions for volunteering within the EU.

**To find out more about the European Year of Volunteering why not download our information sheet "What is EYV 2011" from the web site of your local Volunteer Centre or from Volunteer Centres Ireland:**  
[www.volunteer.ie](http://www.volunteer.ie)