



LEGAL STATUS OF VOLUNTEERS: Country Report Greece

Background to the project

This is one of a series of 'country-reports' produced by the Association of Voluntary Service Organisations (AVSO) and the European Volunteer Centre (CEV). They aim to provide comprehensive and practical information on volunteers and the law in a number of current and future European Union Member States.

Each country report explores, in a standardised format, some of the key questions that face volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations in relation to their legal positions.

Important: the information contained in each country report is subject to resources and quality of information available. It is also subject to frequent change.

If you wish to comment on any of the country reports, or contribute to their annual updates, CEV and AVSO would be delighted to hear from you.

ASSOCIATION OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE ORGANISATIONS (AVSO)

174 rue Joseph II, Brussels 1000, Belgium

TEL: +32 2 230 68 13, FAX: +32 2 231 14 13

E-MAIL: info@avso.org WEB SITE: <http://www.avso.org>

EUROPEAN VOLUNTEER CENTRE (CEV)

Rue de la Science 10, Brussels 1000, Belgium

*TEL: +32 2 511 75 01; FAX: +32 2 514 59 E-MAIL: cev@cev.be; WEB SITE:
<http://www.cev.be>*

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GENERAL DEFINITIONS OF VOLUNTEERISM

VOLUNTEERISM: refers to all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal, full-time or part-time, at home or abroad. It is undertaken of a person's own free-will, choice and motivation, and is without concern for financial gain. It benefits the individual volunteer, communities and society as a whole. It is also a vehicle for individuals and associations to address human, social or environmental needs and concerns. Formal voluntary activities add value, but do not replace, professional, paid employees.

VOLUNTEERING (Fr.: bénévolat): can occur informally (for example neighbourly "helping-out"), or within the structures of a non-profit organisation. It is often (but not always) of a part-time nature. It may occur over one day or many years in a range of different fields. It is good practice to ensure that formal volunteers are covered by appropriate accident, health-care and third party liability insurance, that they receive appropriate training and management, as well as the reimbursement of all out-of-pocket expenses.

FULL-TIME VOLUNTARY SERVICE (Fr.: volontariat): refers to specific, full-time project-based voluntary activities that are carried out on a continuous basis for a limited period of time. Voluntary-service activities may occur at home and abroad. It is good practice to ensure voluntary service volunteers are afforded appropriate social protection, such as accident, health-care and third party liability insurance. Volunteers should also receive appropriate training and management, reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses as well as appropriate accommodation and subsistence allowances as agreed between the volunteer and the non-profit organisation.

I) CONCEPT OF VOLUNTEERISM

There is no legal definition for volunteerism and volunteers in Greece. According to the Hellenic Federation of Non-Governmental Organisations, volunteering is defined as “*willing commitment of a person to work for a specific or unlimited period of time, for the greater good of society without pay*”¹.

II) VOLUNTEERISM AND THE LAW

There is no specific legal framework for volunteers and volunteer organisations in Greece. Consequently volunteers do not benefit from any particular legal protection. In the absence of any specific law, the general regulations governing employment, residency, social and health benefits and mobility apply. Any legal conflicts that arise in relation to volunteers or their organisations are generally dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

1. Reimbursement of expenses and other necessary economic support provided to volunteers: their labour, tax and social security law implications

¹ See www.ngofederation.gr

There is no legal provision regarding **reimbursement of expenses** in Greece. Volunteers would normally depend on the organisations to cover any expenses incurred within the framework of his/her voluntary activity. According to the current rules on taxation, tax is levied on benefits where total the annual income exceeds the €7,043 ceiling.

Where a volunteer is engaged in a full-time service, the expenses may include food, lodging and living costs. These are provided for example in the case of the European Voluntary Service programme of the EU (EVS) and for volunteers taking part in the programme of the Hellenic Post (ELTA). According to a decision of the Secretary General for Youth of 1999 (2725/27.03.1999) volunteers hosted in the framework of EVS are exempt from taxation. Hosting organisations are therefore not obliged to pay taxes on the volunteer allowance or social security contributions.

2. Welfare protection of volunteers

a) Volunteers insurance

There is no legal provision concerning volunteer insurance. The protection of volunteers against the risk of accident, illness or third party liability is therefore dependant on the organisation. If the organisation does not offer insurance, the volunteer should provide it for his or her personal and others security.

Volunteers going abroad are in the same situation. They may be insured under the condition of bilateral agreements between the organisation and the volunteer, such as is the case of large voluntary organisations like the Red Cross and 'Médecins Sans Frontiers'. The EVS program provides each volunteer with an individual insurance plan.

b) Entitlement of volunteers to Public Health and Social protection:

As volunteers have no official legal status, they have no specific rights to social benefits. Their entitlement depends on whether or not their volunteer activities affect their parallel legal status as a student, unemployed, employed, or any other entitling them to protection.

Regarding **health coverage**, national volunteers going abroad are covered by the Greek health care scheme during their stay, provided that they have a completed an E111 form. This allows volunteers to consult a medical practitioner from the public sector in emergency cases. If the volunteer visits a private doctor, he or she will not be reimbursed.

Volunteers from abroad are also covered by the E111 form which covers public sector medical care and emergency assistance. Volunteers (as Greek citizens) are required to pay a percentage of the costs of medicines (25% of the prescription), chemical analyses, x-rays or any other tests. As indicated above, no contribution to the social security scheme is directly payable by the volunteer.

In order to be entitled to receive **unemployment benefits** a volunteer must be available to work and must register in the corresponding unemployment office. In practice this means that a person cannot volunteer for more than 3 days a week or 12 days a month, while receiving benefits. Full-time volunteers at home or abroad will automatically suspend their right to unemployment benefits.

In relation to **family allowances**, young volunteers or their families, will retain entitlement to family allowances according to the general framework under Greek Social Security Law.

Several different levels of allowance may be awarded according to the parents' employment status, income, number and age of children². Greek families are entitled to a tax reduction according to the number of children. A child's participation in voluntary service does not affect this right. However the child must be residing in Greece or another country of the EU.

3. Volunteers Mobility

In the absence of any specific regulations, mobility requirements for volunteers follow the Greek State regulation for all foreign citizens.

- Volunteers coming from an EU country may stay in Greece for 3 months with no visa requirement. For periods of longer than 3 months, volunteers they must obtain a residency permit.
- Third country nationals residing legally in a EU country are allowed to stay in Greece without restriction and no visa is required. The volunteer who stays longer than three months needs to apply for a visa in the Greek consulate of the country of residence.
- Rights of entry for third country nationals is subject to specific bi-lateral agreements. Again the in-coming volunteer should apply for a visa in the Greek consulate of the country of residence, and would normally be issued a visa as a student or trainee.

III) **POLITICAL ACTION PLANS FOR THE PROMOTION OF VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES**

A provision for an alternative civilian service for conscientious objection was legally created in 1998. Nevertheless participation in the alternative Greek civil service is limited because of its duration (3 years, twice as long as the obligatory military service) and the limited vacancies.

Development of volunteerism is currently one of the main priorities of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. A specific law 2646/98 was adopted in 1998 related to the promotion of initiatives for the elderly, enabling them to play a more active role as volunteers, and promoting volunteer services in the field of care provision.

In addition a new unit specifically focused on volunteerism and NGOs as been established within the Ministry of Health and Welfare. It is in charge of the promotion and implementation of volunteer programmes and for the evaluation and funding of volunteer projects. For further information www.ypyp.gr

The National Action Plan for social inclusion 2001-2003 foresaw, in 2001, the preparation of a national action plan for volunteerism that would include the creation of an institutional framework for volunteer organisations and would stimulate the active contribution of volunteers to society.

Furthermore, the General Secretariat for Youth is implementing specific volunteer programmes open to young Greeks between 18 and 30 years old. The three main programmes are³:

² European Foundation for the Improvement of Living & Working Conditions, www.eurofound.eu.int

³ see: <http://www.eu2003.gr/en/cat/58/>

- Volunteer programme of the Hellenic Post (ELTA), where young volunteers are given board, lodging and travel expenses to support the work of the Greek postal service during the summer holidays. The voluntary work takes place in popular tourist areas of Greece, mainly on the islands.
- The volunteer programme ‘Medical Assistance for the Frontier Islands’ is being implemented in cooperation with the Scientific Association of Medical Students of Greece. Under the programme, medical students do voluntary work as assistant medical personnel at hospitals and clinics of the Aegean and Ionian islands. In the period 2000-2001, the programme operated at 25 health centres, hospitals and clinics. In 2002, a total of 280 medical students are participating in the programme, offering their services on 31 islands.
- First-Aid and Emergency Medical Treatment: Under this programme, Ioannina University medical students provide voluntary work at the Regional Health Centres of Epirus. A volunteer programme within the Hellenic Post, where young people receive board, lodging and travel expenses to support the postal services during the summer holidays.

The Hellenic Médecins Sans Frontières and KESSA DIMITRA in cooperation Hellenic International Development Co-operation Department of the Hellenic Ministry of foreign Affairs have also created the first humanitarian portal www.anthropos.gr, linked to the implementation of the programme ‘Society Net-Network for the promotion of volunteerism’ which aims to stimulate volunteerism and improve the role of Hellenic NGOs. Detail information can be found in <http://kessa.dimitra.gr>

IV) FINAL REMARKS

Historically the following 3 characteristics dominated Greek civil society:

- strong intervention of the State and the Orthodox Church in the provision of social services;
- weak government support towards NGOs;
- an individualist society dependant on strong family ties.

However, the situation has changed dramatically over the last 10 years. Church intervention has decreased and the level of participation in, and recognition of non-governmental organisations has increased significantly. This is reflected in several government initiatives and policy documents. For example in June 1999 the Hellenic Parliament passed a bill creating a framework of cooperation between international aid NGOs and the government. Furthermore the National Action Plan for social inclusion 2001-2003 states that ‘*volunteer organisations play an important role since they can supplement State care*’.

Today approximately 4000 NGOs work in fields such as education and culture, environment, human rights, etc. Nonetheless there is no unified legal framework which regulates the status of NGOs and volunteers. Discussions have been on-going between NGO committees and the Ministries about a legal framework for volunteers but nothing definitive has been decided. A draft of a legal framework was outlined but without any formal result.

Nonetheless the third sector and volunteerism is in the process of growth and development, and is receiving greater recognition. EU support has particularly encouraged the development of NGOs and it seems that Greek society and especially young people are more and more receptive to social participation through volunteering. The Olympic Games in 2004 is seen as a good opportunity to promote the importance of voluntary work, and is likely to stimulate the final drafting and adoption of a legal framework for volunteers.

V) USEFUL CONTACTS

Centre of Strategic Planning for Development "DIMITRA",
(KE.S.S.A. DIMITRA) Palaiologou 19
41223, Larissa
HELLAS

Tel: +30 2410 232 978

Fax: +30 2410 239 587

email: kessa@dimitra.gr

<http://kessa.dimitra.gr/> - includes details of events in Greece concerning the development of volunteerism.