

**Volunteering Interest Group meeting
Tuesday 19th June from 14:00 to 15:00
Contribution from AVSO – the Association of Voluntary Service
Organisations**

Conclusions of the conference *"Shaping Policy for Voluntary Service through Research" on the 13th June 2007*

The objectives of the event were to present 3 research studies carried out over the past year in volunteering and voluntary service in order to shed a light on what knowledge is available, what are the misconceptions concerning volunteering/voluntary service and how we can feed these research results into policy making and mainstream EU policies to promote further volunteering.

★ **Why research?**

There is overbearing evidence, that more and more people are around the world involved in some form of voluntary activities. Voluntary service is also gaining in popularity, one example being the European Voluntary Service programme (EVS, run by DG EAC Youth unit) which has more and more young people involved.

Research can shed a light on certain aspects of the programmes and volunteerism that were only presumed so far or simply assumed such as volunteering contributing to inclusion, employment, active participation in the society. Volunteering and voluntary service is part of social development by promoting active participation.

The task is not easy: how to foster and nurture the volunteer spirit, and at the same time not overburden it with administrative procedures, measuring and assessing. Volunteering is about action; however we need reflection on it to be able to move ahead. Volunteering and voluntary service has a powerful potential, however, without proper evaluation and research, the sector will not be able to grow or improve quality and absorption capacity of both funds and volunteers.

Volunteering and voluntary service is a powerful toolbox for social change and regional integration. However, we need to look into what kind of volunteerism produces what impact. We can design programmes that will achieve certain results, like combat discrimination and xenophobia, will help include immigrants and disadvantaged, will include senior citizens and facilitate active ageing. It is important to stress, that shown by our research, these outcomes will not happen by magic, but need to be carefully built into the programme design. Referring back to the EVS programme – despite strong efforts and policy statements on inclusion, only 4% of volunteers can be considered disadvantaged according to the definition used by the EC.

One of the most important outcomes is the awareness, that in order to achieve the results we want, we need supportive legislation and enabling programmes. We get the results we programme for. Just by encouraging young and not so young people to volunteer, or even do a voluntary service doesn't mean, that they will become more tolerant, will vote and participate in the democratic processes.

★ **Current and future research needs:**

Voluntary service can considerably contribute to the personal growth, independence, active participation of the volunteer. Research so far shows, that it does not directly lead to employment, but significantly contributes to **employability** (the acquisition of soft skills and competences) and also considerably **reduces career indecision**, something that has not yet been researched. The costs related to career indecision are not to be underestimated in a regional and national context for young people not really knowing what to do with their lives, taking one course after the other, trying out various jobs and internships, when finally settling for a career. Youth voluntary service can be considered a gap year plus, reducing these insecurities in young people and leading to faster settling into a career pattern.

The **contribution of voluntarism to social capital** is undebated. However no proper investigation has been made into how if at all it contributes to an increasing European identity, increasing tolerance, and increasing active citizenship. There are a few „hot topics“, which would be extremely important to carry out further research into: volunteering as a contribution to understanding between regions (Balkans, new EU borders...), and decreasing xenophobia.

It is time to also properly **measure the impact of volunteerism on the economic capital**. We would need to elaborate a proper model to measure the cost-benefit ratio of volunteerism programmes. ILO has now started to take into consideration un-paid work, which will be a step further towards the estimation volunteers make to the economy. It would be much easier to convince national governments to also financially contribute to volunteering programmes, if they can be made aware of its contribution and implications.

The effect and impact of voluntary service and volunteering on **inclusion and intercultural dialogue** are significant. People, citizens of Europe are much more likely to engage in a real intercultural dialogue by volunteering together for the greater common good, than at a pop-concert or other festivals for example. Again, this needs to be looked into more closely to be able to determine the adequate programmes to achieve these objectives.

There is definitely a change in the **motivation of volunteers** and the **characteristics of voluntary activities**. Poor people are no longer the passive receivers of voluntary activities, but volunteer themselves. The sector is moving away from the previously predominant well-off middle-class white people volunteering for the benefit of the poor, towards a much more participatory, democratic volunteerism. However, there are still many obstacles to this change, such as **VISA issues** hindering south to north/east to west volunteers, the design of inclusive voluntary programmes (even the EVS!), the recognition of voluntary activity as a tool for social change, meaning that the least favoured can also contribute to the improvement of their standards of living, if encouraged and facilitated!

★ **Conclusions:**

Our current and previous research work shows that more research is needed to link the voluntary sector to policy making, to create a volunteer friendly environment both in legal and programme design sense.



Donors and governments should stop funding generalised evaluation work that only demonstrates how well the programmes were run, and how satisfied every participant is. This creates a **knowledge deficit**, because despite numerous evaluations, there is still a huge knowledge deficit to what do these programmes actually achieve and how could they be better designed to really achieve the goals they were set out to in the first place!

There are still very basic research needs to be covered as well, for instance the lack of **statistical data** on European/international volunteers, simply, because when they cross the borders for their voluntary activity in most countries they will be included in the tourism statistics.

There is very little literature and research to date on volunteerism in Europe. There are pockets of research on different issues, most either linked to one country or region or one specific programme. What needs to be done now is a pan-European research into the different aspects of voluntary service and volunteerism, not only mapping up the programmes and activities, but going further into the specific hot-topics of the nature of volunteerism, namely the motivation of volunteers, their profile, the impact of the voluntary activity on their human and social capital, as well as looking into economic impact, on the volunteer and perhaps also on the hosting project.