

PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Report

Doc. 8917 – 22 December 2000

Improving the status and role of volunteers as a contribution by the Parliamentary Assembly to the International Year of Volunteers 2001

(Rapporteur: Ms GÜLEK, Turkey, Socialist Group)

Summary

The year 2001 has been declared International Year of Volunteers by the United Nations. The Parliamentary Assembly has always encouraged the development of the forces of civil society as a guarantee for social cohesion and an expression of participatory democracy. Voluntary action involves learning, sharing and helping others and enables all citizens to play a part in the democratic process. The Assembly welcomes the United Nations' initiative and calls on the member states of the Council of Europe to adopt various incentive measures during the year in order to promote volunteerism at national and European levels.

I. Draft recommendation

1. The year 2001 has been declared International Year of Volunteers by the United Nations General Assembly and the UN Volunteers Programme has been designated as the focal point for its preparation and follow-up. Voluntary action has a long tradition in most European countries, even though the degree to which it exists and the forms which it takes vary with individual states' political, democratic, socio-cultural and economic conditions.

2. Voluntary action involves learning, sharing and helping others: it enables the young and not-so-young to acquire experience of life, civic spirit and vocational skills. It plays a part in transmitting knowledge. It makes unemployed volunteers more employable and helps to keep the elderly active.

3. Voluntary action represents a substantial proportion of the gross domestic product in many states. It responds to social change, new needs and human suffering. Sometimes, it anticipates political intervention by creating new types of service, which later provide paid employment. Voluntary action is therefore a source of jobs.

4. The Assembly has always urged the need for the forces of civil society to emerge as a guarantee of social cohesion and the expression of participatory democracy. Voluntary action should enable all citizens to play a part in the democratic process, and its role should be particularly encouraged in the central and east European states, which are working to consolidate their newly found democracy.

5. The Assembly welcomes the United Nations' initiative, which also turns the spotlight on the Council of Europe's ongoing activities, such as its European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-term Voluntary Service for Young People and its work on a code of ethics for young volunteers; the Assembly strongly favours the development of a genuine culture of voluntary service, necessarily extending to the Council of Europe itself.

6. The Assembly accordingly asks the Committee of Ministers to call on member states to:

i. become involved, during this celebratory year, in information and awareness-raising campaigns on voluntary action, emphasising the invaluable contribution that volunteers make to the community, and the vital need for partnership between volunteers and professionals in all fields, particularly the social sector;

ii. declare a European Day of Volunteerism;

iii. seek to identify and eliminate, in their laws and practice, any obstacles that directly or indirectly prevent people from engaging in voluntary action, and to reduce tax pressure that penalises voluntary action;

iv. adopt and promote, in accordance with their national traditions, dynamic policies favouring voluntary action which, *inter alia*:

a. recognise the democratic, humanitarian, social, educational, training and economic value of voluntary action;

b. endorse the role played by voluntary action in involving citizens in the democratic process;

c. give voluntary workers a legal status and adequate social protection, while respecting their independence and removing financial obstacles to volunteering;

d. use various measures and incentives to encourage everyone and all sectors of the community – including political leaders, the active, the unemployed, the disabled, the elderly, the retired, migrants, refugees and the excluded – to become involved in voluntary action;

e. help, particularly by earmarking budgetary and other resources, to support and develop voluntary initiatives of value to the community, while ensuring that the funds in question are appropriately used and allocated;

v. urge voluntary associations and volunteers themselves to respect the values and principles of the Council of Europe in their objectives and their activities and to remain politically neutral.

7. The Assembly takes the view that the Committee of Ministers should also:

i. urge the member states to ratify the European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-term Voluntary Service for Young People, so that it can come into force by the end of 2001, and use up-to-date technologies, such as the Internet, to implement it;

ii. work for ratification of this convention by the European Union and non-member states of the Council of Europe;

iii. speed up preparation of the code of ethics for young volunteers, setting out the rights and duties of young volunteers in Europe, with a view to finalising it as soon as possible;

iv. sponsor the organisation of an annual European televised contest, in co-operation with Eurovision, designed to reward outstanding individual, group and community volunteer achievements;

v. institute a European observatory and registry of volunteerism.

8. Finally, following the example set by other international organisations, the Committee of Ministers should bring the voluntary dimension into the Council of Europe Secretariat and recruit volunteers to work alongside Council staff and experts in areas that are insufficiently developed, such as the rights and welfare of children, the promotion of women's status, the fight against trafficking in human beings and anti-racism.

II. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Gülek

1. The motion for a recommendation (Doc. 8645), originally tabled by Mrs Pulgar, who has since left the Assembly, and now carried on by your rapporteur, seeks to improve the status and role of volunteers. Its main purpose is to associate the Council of Europe and especially the Parliamentary Assembly with the events of 2001, designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Volunteers (IYV).

2. In order to complete this report, the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee held a Seminar on Voluntary Work in Brighton on 14 and 15 October 2000. The rapporteur also met the IYV 2001 team and is very grateful for their generous help and advice.

The Council of Europe's deliberations on voluntary action

3. This motion also reflects the Council of Europe's ongoing concern with this question, demonstrated by the many regular reports on "international voluntary service" prepared by our Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee from the 1960s to the 1980s and by Committee of Ministers recommendations, such as the text, now slightly dated, on social security for workers without professional status, including voluntary workers (Recommendation Rec(91) 2, and the more recent Recommendation Rec(94) 4, encouraging member states to establish a voluntary service at national and European level).

4. This work within the Council of Europe has resulted, *inter alia*, in the recent European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-term Voluntary Service for Young People (<http://conventions.coe.int>), which was opened for signature in May 2000. However, whether due to genuine impediments or a lack of information, it has so far (at 21 December 2000) been signed (but not ratified) by only five countries (France, Luxembourg, Romania, San Marino and the United King-

dom), whereas five ratifications are required for its entry into force. The convention is open to non-member states of the Council of Europe.

5. Why was this convention drawn up? Transnational voluntary service contributes to civic education, intercultural exchange and the development of a European consciousness among young people. It provides an educational opportunity (part of what we call informal learning) to serve society and give practical expression to the concept of mutual responsibility.

6. This convention is intended as a tool to facilitate, promote and support transnational voluntary service for young people up to the age of 25. Under its terms, young people should receive preparation and training for voluntary action: this work is not remunerated, but the young people should receive board, lodging and pocket money; they should be insured against certain health risks, etc. The value of the experience thus gained by young people is officially recognised and formalised by a certificate.

7. When called on to state its opinion on the draft text of this convention, the Assembly expressed its strong support and its belief that the European Union should associate itself with this undertaking.

8. Furthermore, a code of ethics for young volunteers is currently being drawn up under the Council of Europe Youth Programme and should be finalised and adopted in the course of the year 2001.

9. The UN International Year of Volunteers is a timely initiative and throws the spotlight on these Council of Europe achievements; it is essential to seize this opportunity to "sell" the convention: that is, to disseminate it, make it better known and work for its ratification within our respective parliaments, so that it can enter into force before the end of the year.

2001: International Year of Volunteers (IYV 2001)

10. The International Year of Volunteers (<http://www.iyv2001.org>) aims to promote and facilitate the work of volunteers everywhere in the world, whether young or old, whether or not members of an organisation, and to help in setting up a network for them.

11. The year is co-ordinated by the United Nations Volunteer Programme (<http://www.unv.org>), which was set up in 1970 by the UN General Assembly and is part of the UN system. It works in fields as diverse as conflict prevention and peace building, urban development, the environment, microcredits, and information technology, mainly using professional people with volunteer status.

12. To mark the year, many countries have set up national committees, responsible for reviewing the overall situation of volunteers in their country and proposing specific initiatives. In addition, the UN Volunteer Programme has drawn up an interesting list of suggestions of possible activities during the year for the attention of states, various groupings, businesses, trade unions or any interested party (see appendix).

Volunteers: who and why?

13. No state can exist without volunteers, whether they are individuals or groups, organised or informal. In many countries, voluntary action contributes significantly to both society and the economy and fosters social cohesion and political stability.

14. The economic contribution made to society by voluntary activity is estimated at 8% of gross domestic product and may even reach 14% of GDP, depending on the country concerned (see: *Study of the Extent and Role of Volunteering*, 1997, National Centre for Volunteering, Dr Gaskin and Davis Smith). This contribution is rarely reflected in official statistics or recognised by governments and politicians. According to the UN's figures, there were 40 million volunteers aged over 15 years in formal programmes throughout the world in 1993. Nine million of these were in France. Belgium has 2.5 million volunteers, a very high percentage in terms of its total population.

15. Volunteering rates in the central and eastern European countries are markedly lower: in Slovakia, for example, one person in ten is involved in voluntary action, compared to four in ten for Sweden or the Netherlands.

16. Men and women are almost equally represented in voluntary work.

17. Governments alone cannot always respond to society's challenges and apply appropriate solutions: the role of civil society is undeniable and undisputed. Voluntary action helps the young and less young to acquire experience, civic spirit and vocational skills: it provides satisfaction for employed adults and retired persons; it fosters the handing down of knowledge; and it is a factor in successful ageing ("active ageing").

18. Voluntary action has a role to play in the fight for full employment, in so far as it improves the "employability" of the unemployed, helps restore their self-confidence, opens doors to them and provides them with new qualifications that are of value in the labour market. In addition, voluntary action is often behind the creation of new kinds of services and paid employment.

19. Volunteers are part of civil society, the existence and development of which are guarantors of democracy and peace: the Assembly has emphasised the role of civil society on many occasions and in numerous declarations. In a world where money tends to be thought of as the supreme value and where the "me culture" is gaining ground, most of the time voluntary action is a gift to others and an expression of sharing.

Patterns and areas of voluntary action

20. Voluntary action exists in various forms and to varying degrees, depending on countries' cultural and religious traditions and on political and economic factors. Sometimes it emerges to compensate for the state's shortcomings and to respond to social changes and human suffering: one of the most recent examples is voluntary action on behalf of Aids victims. However, even in regions where the welfare state is highly developed, such as Scandinavia, it has always continued to exist.

21. In central and eastern European countries, voluntary action was severely undermined by communism, which made it compulsory or mandatory. It is now playing a significant role in the transition process and in building democracy, and is responding to social problems that were previously unknown, such as homelessness and poverty, or were unacknowledged, such as the rights of the disabled. Its renaissance is frequently tied in with the adoption of new constitutions and a recognition of the right of association.

22. This phenomenon is sometimes triggered by a particular event. For example, in the difficult circumstances of the 1999 earthquakes, Turkey saw an impressive flow of volunteers heading to the devastated sites in order to demonstrate their solidarity. This event led to the increased recognition and development of the civil society sector.

23. In France, the wreck of the *Erika* and the subsequent oil slick drew hundreds of volunteers to the oil-polluted beaches and coastline, intent on cleaning them up with whatever came to hand.

24. In addition to the traditional forms of volunteer work, new technologies such as the Internet are giving rise to such gestures. For example, All Experts (<http://www.allexperts.com>) aims to help people find solutions to problems as rapidly as possible, and consists of a team of specialists with skills in a wide range of subjects, available to reply to questions within twenty-four hours.

25. The United Nations Volunteers Programme, mentioned above, has also established an Internet site for volunteers working in areas as diverse as translation, data analysis, teaching, on-line medical diagnosis, fundraising, etc.

26. The most popular areas for voluntary action are still sport, leisure activities, education, the social sector and assistance for the elderly, etc. The voluntary sector detects new needs, such as personalised help for the unemployed, especially mentoring, management of associations, nature and environmental protection, palliative care for the terminally ill, etc.

27. Voluntary action also encompasses politics and human rights. In particular, international organisations in the UN system make use of volunteers and, for example, the OSCE uses them for long-term monitoring of election processes, especially in the newly emerging European democracies.

28. The Council of Europe could profitably draw on this practice, particularly in those areas of its work where financial restrictions have resulted in reduced activity, such as children's rights and child protection, promotion of women's equality, the fight against trafficking in human beings, anti-racism, etc.

Recognition and promotion of voluntary action

29. Although many countries have legislation or regulations governing the right of association or the right to form trade unions, very few have systematically and comprehensively recognised the value of voluntary action and granted volunteers a genuine legal status.

30. Spain has enacted legislation in this field: Law 6/1996 on Voluntary Work provides a definition of volunteers and their rights and duties. Bearing in mind voluntary action's role as a pillar of civil society's participation in social affairs, a National Plan for Voluntary Action (1997-2000) was prepared in conjunction with the NGOs and the seven ministries concerned, aimed at raising awareness, encouraging support for voluntary action and ensuring co-ordination of the various activities. A second plan is currently being prepared.

31. A few countries have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to remove the obstacles to receiving social security payments while simultaneously carrying out an activity.

32. In the United Kingdom, for example, a number of programmes and measures have been in place since the 1980s to encourage unemployed and disabled people to become involved in voluntary action in the health and social services sector. In Ireland, an unemployed person may carry out voluntary action so long as this does not compromise his or her availability or the search for paid employment or training. In Germany, persons in receipt of unemployment benefit are permitted to perform up to seventeen hours of voluntary work per week.

33. Recently, the private sector – and government bodies – has begun to take an increased interest in voluntary action, to improve both businesses' brand image and their internal workings. It is no longer rare to see businesses sponsoring projects by internal or external groups of volunteers. Staff members' involvement in voluntary work is often perceived as a positive factor in their development, and paid leave or financial assistance may be made available.

Conclusions

34. The rapporteur believes there is a clear and growing political interest in the phenomenon of voluntary action and its potential role in society.

35. The rapporteur hopes that this report will provide an opportunity for the Parliamentary Assembly to associate itself with the International Year of Volunteers and to come out clearly in favour of developing a culture of voluntary service in Europe. There is much to be done in this respect.

36. The Council of Europe's member states should be invited to adopt and promote energetic policies in favour of voluntary action which would, *inter alia*:

- recognise voluntary work's social, educational and training value and its independent nature;
- endorse the role of voluntary action as a means of public participation in the democratic process;
- grant legal status and adequate social protection to volunteers;
- encourage, by various measures, involvement in voluntary service by everyone, including disadvantaged minorities in traditionally excluded groups: unemployed persons, migrants and the disabled or elderly;

- assist in supporting and developing voluntary action initiatives, particularly by allocating financial resources.

37. The states should concentrate on identifying and removing any obstacles in their legislation and practice, especially administrative and financial barriers, which prevent people, directly or indirectly, from carrying out voluntary action.

38. During this particular year, the member states should undertake awareness-raising campaigns on voluntary action, emphasising volunteers' invaluable contribution and the essential partnership with other professional actors in almost all sectors of voluntary activity, particularly the social field.

39. The Council of Europe member states should also be invited to ratify the European Convention on the Promotion of a Transnational Long-term Voluntary Service for Young People as rapidly as possible and to take steps to implement it using up-to-date technological resources such as the Internet.

40. The Council of Europe should speed up the drafting of a European code of ethics for young volunteers and launch it at a possible European conference on voluntary action: this could close the International Year.

41. Finally, in line with other international organisations, the Council of Europe would be well advised, particularly in light of the restrictions on staff recruitment, to make use of volunteers, who could work alongside the Council's staff and experts in developing certain activities within its remit that are currently somewhat neglected, such as child protection, promotion of equality for women, the fight against racism, etc.

APPENDIX:

Ideas for action during the International Year of Volunteers 2001 (extracts from the IYV 2001 brochure)

- Telling the story of "what we did to succeed" to a newspaper or radio;
- Presenting a report on the achievements of volunteers in the country;
- Creating a documentation centre on volunteering in your school or high school;
- Paying tribute to volunteers' talents by awarding prizes;
- Determining the urgent needs in your own sector of volunteer work;
- Proposing your services to a volunteering organisation;
- Thinking about collective action programmes within your community;
- Assessing the potential for volunteer activities within your company;
- Submitting ideas to your IYV 2001 National Committee;
- Supervising volunteers if you have experience in voluntary work;
- Offering your help to people with Aids, accident victims or the disabled;

- Counselling others if you have experience of illness, dependency or grief;
- Dreaming up a brilliant advertising or fund-raising idea for volunteer work;
- Applying the example of success elsewhere to your community;
- Making your business or industrial concern a sponsor for volunteering;
- Sharing your ideas, projects and successes on the IYV 2001 website;
- Training volunteers in management or accounting;
- Expressing your support for voluntary work in your political party's programme;
- Giving your employees or civil servants leave for voluntary work;
- Considering whether voluntary work could replace certain court sentences;
- Use volunteers to provide training in social or health activities;
- Selling supplies at preferential prices to voluntary groups;
- Organising a seminar or "market" for sharing volunteering experiences;
- Donating blood;
- Visiting children in orphanages;
- Providing free legal advice;
- Collecting and distributing used clothes, shoes, toys or food to poor families;

- Providing the elderly in need with letter-writing services, health checks, etc;
- Cleaning schools, community centres, hospitals;
- Cleaning up beaches, rivers, parks, nature reserves;
- Creating prizes, awards, certificates for volunteers and solidarity actions, etc.

Reporting committee: Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee.

Reference to committee: Doc. 8645 and Reference No. 2486 of 3 April 2000.

Draft recommendation unanimously adopted by the committee on 12 December 2000.

Members of the committee: Cox (*Chairman*), Ragnarsdóttir, Hegyi, Gatterer (*Vice-Chairs*), Albrink, Alís Font, Arnau, Belohorská, Biga-Friganović, Björnemalm, Cesário, Christodoulides, Chyzh, Dees, Dhaille (*alternate: About*), Duivesteijn, Evin, Flynn, Gamzatova, Gibuła, Glesener, Gregory, Gülek, Gusenbauer, Gustafsson, Haack, Hancock (*alternate: Vis*), Høegh, Hrebenciuc, Jirousová, Lakhova, Laternser, Liiv, Lotz, Luhtanen, Lupu, Markovská, Marmazov, Martelli, Marty, Mattéi, Monfils, Možgan, Mularoni, Ouzký, Padilla, Paegle, Pavlidis, Poptodorova, Pozza Tasca, Raškinis, Rizzi (*alternate: Polenta*), Santkin, Smirlis, Stefani, Surján, Tahir, Telek, Troncho, Vella, Vermot-Mangold, Volodin, Voronin, Wójcik.

N.B. The names of those members present at the meeting are printed in italics.

See 5th Sitting, 24 January 2001 (adoption of the draft recommendation); and Recommendation 1496.