

CEV Calls for a Change of Gear for Volunteering!

Since the first day of the COVID19 pandemic crisis, citizens have responded by adapting and launching numerous volunteer initiatives. This has demonstrated, beyond all doubt, the importance of volunteers and a vibrant and responsive civil society, reflecting the spirit of a resilient and caring community. In a context where, in many parts of Europe, volunteers, volunteer organisations and volunteering infrastructure organisations have suffered from a lack of investment and absence of public and State support in recent times, this unprecedented situation has highlighted more than ever just how critical volunteers are to our society, especially as a key partner of local policymakers at municipality level. **As part of the post-crisis recovery process, CEV calls for policymakers to “step up a gear” regarding volunteering policies and programmes.** This “change of gear” should include increased focus, intensity and speed of investment and partnership development with volunteer-involving and volunteer infrastructure organisations and lead to a situation that more properly reflects the importance of the energy, expertise, and commitment of volunteers for health, well-being and solidarity in Europe, whilst avoiding the exploitation of volunteers in for-profit settings. **Here are 5 reasons why:**

1. Appreciation of Contribution

In order for volunteers and their organisations to continue to realise their potential as a force for the common good, Europe needs to better reflect, through positive messaging, appreciative discourse, and funding, the importance of volunteers for quality of life, wellbeing and solidarity in Europe, and their contribution to social inclusion, European democracy and European Values.

2. Empowerment

The ability to provide timely and appropriate responses to sudden needs that appear in crisis situations in a flexible and coordinated manner, requires volunteering organisations to be stable, well-established and well-regarded not only in the community, but also and particularly, by local, regional and national authorities. It also requires individual citizens to be empowered in thriving communities at the local level characterised by strong interpersonal connections, that are often established in the frame of volunteer-based and volunteer-led initiatives. Volunteer-led initiatives that have grown out of the COVID19 crisis should be supported so that they are able to continue to harness the energy and enthusiasm generated and continue to respond to societal needs during the recovery period and beyond. In this way, as more citizens gain a deeper understanding of the importance and power of volunteering, adding to the richness and diversity of the volunteering environment in Europe.

3. Engaging New Volunteers and Methods

Continued sanitary and physical distancing measures, in place to prevent the further spread of the COVID19 virus and to protect vulnerable people, will mean that a certain number of regular volunteers, particularly elderly people or those with underlying health issues, will not return to their previous volunteer activities. If needs are to be continued to be met, discrimination & marginalisation combatted and human rights defended, more citizens from diverse realities and backgrounds will need to be empowered to support themselves and others. This means that new volunteers will need to be engaged and trained and new methods for volunteering engagement, including that taking place online, be explored and supported. Online volunteering has shown the importance of digitalisation as a critical way to meet many needs in our societies these days. Supporting digitalization in volunteering organizations is one of the key ways to achieve the full potential of volunteering.

4. Independent and Inclusive Engagement

Sufficient and sustainable State funding for volunteer organisations, distributed in a democratic, and transparent way, will prevent the existence of a civil society vacuum. The COVID19 crisis has once again shown how, in such a void, individuals and groups with criminal intentions and ideologically extreme groups, step in to abuse the situation by providing material assistance to citizens in need. This will result in subsequent ‘debts’ and appreciation to such groups, leading to long term challenges in social cohesion, safety and security for all.

5. Coordination and Resources

To ensure that organisations are in a more secure position to contribute effectively to recovery processes, that more volunteers can be engaged and trained (including the high number that have been motivated during the COVID19 crisis to offer their time and expertise, but to whom it has not yet been possible to allocate roles), and new volunteering methods developed, volunteering policies should be coordinated across policy fields and should include robust support for a functioning volunteering infrastructure based on cross-sector collaboration and consultation. This should be at all decision making levels including, and especially, at the local level and the specificities and needs of the volunteering sector need to be taken into account in the recovery period alongside those of business interests.