



2011 is the European Year of Volunteering. A couple of days before the Year's closing conference in Warsaw on 1 and 2 December, we interviewed John Macdonald, Head of Task Force for the European Year of Volunteering 2011, from the European Commission Directorate-General for Communication, to obtain more insights into the year's objectives and its preliminary results.

- Can you tell us what the European Year of Volunteering is about and what its objectives are?

The European Year of Volunteering (EYV) was originally an initiative of the EYV 2011 Alliance, an informal gathering of volunteer networks, such as Caritas Europe, the Red Cross and European Youth Forum. It was launched by the European Commission to celebrate the efforts of an estimated 100 million Europeans who profess to volunteering; this is about a quarter of the European adult population. At the same time it challenges the 400 million Europeans who are not volunteers to encourage them to join in. The timing for the Year was also opportune as it corresponds with the 10th anniversary of the UN International Year of Volunteers (2001).

The year has four objectives. First we want to make it easier for people to volunteer by creating an enabling environment for volunteering. Secondly we want to improve the quality of volunteering by empowering volunteer networks. The third objective is twofold and is about recognition. At the macro economic scale we don't have enough internationally comparable statistics. To give recognition to the sector we need to know how big and important it is. At the micro level, we seek recognition for the individual: the skills and competences that people can gain from a volunteering activity tend to go unrecognized and unacknowledged. The fourth objective is about raising awareness on the issues primarily amongst relevant stakeholders, policymakers, but also the general public.

Our work to reach these objectives was supported by a communication campaign that included an innovative initiative called the 'EYV-Tour', which was a travelling road show that jumped from

one capital city to another, where the country concerned could showcase its volunteering work and volunteers could help raise awareness among national policy-makers. It was also a useful moment to increase the media attention in most countries for a topic that does not usually enjoy the limelight.

- What is the connection between this European Year of Volunteering and initiatives at global level?

There is a clear overlap with the United Nations' interests in the field of volunteering. Throughout the year the European Commission has been in constant contact with UNV, attending each others' conferences, working together and learning from each other. It appears that the way the EU goes about things is attractive for other parts of the world. Since we are dealing here with areas of responsibility that are national competences, how does one get very diverse countries to move in the same direction? In this, and other areas, such as education, culture and youth policy the EU actually excels. This was what UNV was interested in learning from the EU. Another area of cooperation is that of humanitarian aid and crisis response: the European Commission is currently involved in setting up a service currently referred to as the 'European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps' as described in the Lisbon Treaty. The European Commission is making sure that this new service has an added value to those organizations that are already active in the field, and have launched some pilot projects to prepare the way. The European Commission is also looking forward to the findings of the first State of the World's Volunteerism Report that will be launched at the special session of the UN GA on 5 December.

- Is the current economic and financial crisis affecting the work of volunteers in Europe, and if so in what way?

The European Commission was aware, on the basis of their study on the state of volunteering in the European Union of February 2010 (http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/news/news1015_en.htm)> http://ec.europa.eu/citizenship/news/news1015_en.htm), that over time there has been an increase in the number of voluntary organisations, but at the same time there has been an increase in the fight for resources. There is a growing problem of finding sustainable sources of funding. Traditionally the public sector is the biggest contributor to the volunteering sector and it is that public purse that is now being cut back drastically. So the biggest source of anxiety in the volunteering world over the past year is the source of funding for their activities. Volunteerism is not a cost-free activity. It takes money, and sources of funding – especially from the public sector – are now more scarce. But at the same time, rising levels of unemployment, cutbacks in the provisions of public services, especially in the health and social sector, mean that there are more needs that should be addressed by volunteers. So there is 'more need' and 'less money', which is a source of concern for the volunteering world.

- What can the European Union do about this?

Most of the change for the better in the world of volunteering will need to be implemented by the national, sometimes sub-national, authorities because these are member state competencies. Disincentives or barriers to volunteering, such as uncertainty about tax treatment or problems with insurance rules, are national responsibilities, which the national authorities need to be made aware of and need to address. At the EU level we can foster change, especially in the area of cross border mobility of volunteers where we can have an added value, but the actual implementation and action will be for national authorities and will be different in each country. Some countries have no interest in codifying in law the rights of volunteers, for instance, whereas in others this has been found to be very helpful.

- Do you think the year has been a success?

I am sure that the European Year of Volunteers 2011 is already a success. There have been a lot of activities, conferences, studies and even legislative changes on the subject. All those changes were facilitated by the European Year. We also had two European political milestones. On the 20th of September the European Commission adopted for the first time a 'Communication' on volunteering. It was swiftly followed by the Council of Ministers making a similar political statement, called 'Council Conclusions' on volunteering. These two policy statements are very useful in the context of a continent with huge diversity. They are not binding but have the power of being a frame of reference for policy action in the years to come, both at the European and national level. Without the EYV this would not have been possible. Everyone is giving consistent messages of support to volunteering.

- With the EYV coming to an end, will there be any specific follow up in the next years?

The issue of volunteering will indeed be carried on during the upcoming European Year celebrations. In fact we find ourselves in a sequence of European Years that are thematically linked. 2010 was the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2011 the European Year of Volunteering, 2012 will be the European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity, and 2013 the European Year of the Citizen, in all we can maintain a focus on volunteering. In addition, the European Commission is expecting the results of the EYV2011 Alliance's six working groups at the year's closing ceremony at Warsaw on 1 and 2 December, which will be called PAVE 'Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe.' What is important is that all the parties involved, both the European institutions and the EYV2011 Alliance members, want to have a meaningful legacy for this European Year. We don't want the

momentum that was built up through 2011 to come grinding to a halt on the 31st of December. The Commission wants to make sure that this European Year has a lasting, meaningful legacy in terms of policy development and positive change for volunteering in the years to come.