

Older people and volunteering



From users to providers

Older people have typically been seen as the beneficiaries of voluntary activities. Indeed, the role of voluntary services is likely to become increasingly important in the context of cuts in state-provided welfare services and payments as a result of the economic crisis. However, increasing attention is also being paid to the contribution and potential of older people as voluntary workers. This reorientation in perspectives – from older people as recipients to providers – reflects new social and economic conditions in Europe, but is strongly driven by growing awareness of demographic change. Increasingly, policymakers are seeing the need to engage this older population in volunteering.

Between 2010 and 2030, it is reckoned, the number of people aged between 65 and 79 years in the EU will increase by more than 35%.

Differences between Member States

Older people have been active in volunteering, both in the informal sector – self-help and assisting neighbours – as well as formally, through organisations linked to charities, church organisations and local authorities. However, there are big differences between countries in terms of their traditions of volunteering, differences that are associated with levels of economic development and expenditure on social services. Involvement in volunteering has been traditionally higher in countries such as the UK and the Netherlands than in Greece, Italy, Romania and Bulgaria. Data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) project indicate that formal volunteering by older people follows a north–south gradient in Europe. Recent Eurofound research finds increasing numbers of older people involved in volunteering across Europe – in Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden, as well as in Spain, Slovenia and Romania.

The involvement of older people in volunteering is highest in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands, lower in Germany and France and lowest in Italy, Greece and Spain.

Which older people volunteer?

The term ‘older people’, of course, covers an enormously diverse group – at least four decades in terms of age and including all manner of lifestyles, values and economic situations. In general, participation in volunteering declines markedly after the age of 75; differences between people aged from 50 to 74 years are less marked. Involvement in volunteering is also more common among those with better levels of health and with higher levels of education. Most importantly, it appears that participation in volunteering at older ages is much more likely among those who were already actively involved in their younger years: in general, people rarely start volunteering just as a result of having more time when they enter retirement (even if many express an interest to begin volunteering then). People who volunteer are also more likely to have friends or contacts who are also involved.

Why do older people volunteer?

Eurofound has looked in some detail at why older people volunteer. Among the perceived and reported benefits are opportunities to use existing skills, retain and develop social contacts and reduce isolation and build greater self-esteem. Several initiatives in Poland and in Germany indicate the desire among volunteers to reduce their dependence on others and to increase mutual support. More generally, older people who volunteer identify benefits for themselves, for others in their community and for their society in general. They often volunteer in organisations

Volunteering develops social contacts, creates structures of mutual support and builds community ties.



dedicated to promoting welfare and health, or leisure, education and culture. Participation brings direct involvement in local development initiatives and engagement in civil society. Although the most disadvantaged groups of older people, and especially those aged 80 and over, tend to be less involved, volunteering does constitute one means to promote social inclusion for the elderly.

The challenges of formal volunteering

The extent and nature of volunteering in formal organisations reflects, to some extent, the promotion of volunteering by these organisations as well as the structure they provide in order to ensure a supportive, protective and facilitative environment. In an increasingly competitive voluntary sector, organisations need to develop professional human resource policies to recruit, train and retain volunteers. Voluntary organisations depend upon a core of active, motivated and committed individuals, who act as leaders. The matching of older volunteers to specific shorter or longer-term activities – reflecting their preferences, capacities and interests – is critical. And although many older people bring specific skills, experience and capabilities, many may need support through training or skills development. Benefits may arise from the increasing professionalisation of volunteering – in terms of such issues as health and safety, insurance and expenses; however, there are also downsides, associated with inflexibility and the growing need for background or security checks.

The potential for the future

Future strategies for volunteering are likely to highlight the potential contribution that older people can make, rather than their limitations. New retirees will bring greater skills and expertise, but may also have other preferences regarding their tasks and

The scope for involving older people in volunteering could be increased by taking steps to involve all people of working age to a greater extent, in preparation for a retirement spent volunteering.

how volunteering is organised; hence, it may be necessary to develop more flexible approaches to participation – for instance, shorter term or more specific tasks – to encourage involvement. It seems as if some kind of ‘natural barrier’ to volunteering exists for people aged 80 and over – particularly those who are isolated, in poor health, or socially excluded. However, this is a group of people who would potentially benefit from more social interaction and perhaps more creative intergenerational volunteering initiatives among the older population. Among those aged 55 and older, there may be scope to engage people coming to the end of their working lives and making the transition into retirement. Across Europe, there is an increasing focus on corporate social responsibility, including corporate volunteering; research indicates the importance of promoting forms of volunteering among the

working-age population that can be continued into retirement. With this in mind, links between workplaces and community organisations could be strengthened with a specific view to increase exposure to volunteering.

The European Year

For people of all ages, there is increasing awareness of the personal, social and economic benefits of volunteering; across Europe, there is major untapped potential for significant numbers of older people to become more involved in volunteering. The European Union will contribute to extend appreciation of the culture of voluntary work through its research and communication activities in the European Year; older people will be seen as a key component in this strategy.

Further information

This fact sheet forms part of the Eurofound resource pack *Volunteering – a force for change*.

The pack looks at the extent of volunteering across Europe, examines the contribution that it can make to the goals of social policy, and looks at ways in which volunteering may be encouraged among European citizens.

For a copy of the pack or for further information on this topic, please email: volunteering@eurofound.europa.eu

To view the resource pack online and all other Eurofound materials on this topic, please visit: www.eurofound.europa.eu/resourcepacks/volunteering.htm

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