



Volunteering by older people in the EU

Executive summary

Introduction

In this European Year of Volunteering, this report takes up the relatively neglected theme of volunteering by older people in Europe. While it is common to think of older people as beneficiaries of voluntary endeavour, their contribution as volunteers has received much less attention.

This research includes 30 case studies on volunteering by older people from 11 EU Member States: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and the United Kingdom. The research focuses on those initiatives that operate mainly at the local level and succeed in involving older people, particularly those at higher risk of social exclusion, as volunteers. It has become evident from research and practice that volunteering in old age may be a tool to promote social inclusion of the older population and to improve quality of life for all generations.

Policy context

The population beyond retirement age is, of course, large – and growing – but also diverse, with different economic, health and social resources. These different conditions and experiences influence opportunities and preferences for participation in voluntary activities. One of the main reasons for lower rates of volunteering is the poor living conditions of some groups of people, who often have to cope not only with low income but also with physical disabilities. It is important, therefore, to strengthen broader policy strategies such as national health and income policies that target the general improvement of living conditions of older people. Programmes tailored specifically to the involvement of older people as volunteers are rare. Furthermore, the case study organisations differ in the importance they attach to the subject of social inclusion through volunteering.

Key findings

The case studies illustrate various options for engagement of older people in volunteering. A crucial precondition is, however, that their latent volunteering potential should be recognised and supported. This applies to the policy and practical levels. There is a remarkable range of voluntary activities by older people that go far beyond the traditional age-related topics such as support to frail or sick older people. Various measures necessary to promote the social and cultural integration of population groups at risk of social exclusion are highlighted. The research also demonstrates impacts on intragenerational relations as well as on intergenerational solidarity in the community.

Recruitment of older people as volunteers (and among them those at risk of social exclusion) often requires some effort. Nevertheless, several factors facilitating their involvement are identified: in addition to reliable funding, recruitment and retention strategies that are tailored to this group are important. However, social inclusion of older people through volunteering has become a new challenge. There is still a general lack of political awareness of the potential of older people.

With regard to recruitment and retention of older people for volunteering, the following elements seem to contribute to success (often in combination with one another):

- Comprehensive media, communication and awareness-raising approaches are the 'classical' way to engage older volunteers. In addition, it is helpful to cultivate and maintain relationships with specific groups such as religious and ethnic communities as well as with community centres.

- A small proportion of initiatives do not aim directly at encouraging older people to volunteer; instead their involvement is a 'side effect'. In fact, the goal of some measures is the general promotion of active and self-determined ageing. They invite older people from different social strata to think and talk about their expectations regarding different aspects of ageing as well as to support each other.
- To reach those older people who are not yet involved, a 'gate keeper' can be helpful. A gate keeper usually already participates to a certain degree and therefore bridges the gap between the initiative and the potential volunteers, for example by inviting family members, friends and neighbours to become involved.
- Preparatory courses can promote recognition and awareness of competencies by helping older people to value their life experience and skills as resources for volunteering. Such courses can also support re-orientation after a critical life event.
- An important precondition to enjoying voluntary work is that volunteers undertake only those tasks they are able to perform. Many initiatives try to ensure this by assessing volunteers' skills and offering special training courses.
- Esteem and acknowledgement are highly important for the retention of volunteers. Offering awards to volunteers and to voluntary organisations can be an effective way of showing appreciation.
- If the organisation offers the volunteers flexibility, they appreciate being able to decide on the extent of their commitment. This applies, for example, to frequency and duration of participation in voluntary work, which may be important to the new generation of older volunteers.
- To retain volunteers, provision of insurance as well as expense allowances may play a crucial role.

Many positive effects of volunteering on older people can be demonstrated – for example, enhanced subjective well-being and strengthened self-esteem. These effects can be explained by the frequently reported satisfaction at being able to pursue

meaningful and fulfilling activities beyond paid work and family obligations. Despite their individual situations, problems and risks, older volunteers succeed in ageing actively.

Policy pointers

Voluntary engagement in old age does not replace provision through formal social, cultural and other organised services. Quite the contrary; the case studies demonstrate the positive and complementary effects of voluntary engagement that are known from other studies. Professional support by salaried staff can also be regarded as one of the most important influencing factors for effectiveness and sustainability.

To date, social partners appear relatively passive in their support of voluntary engagement. There are a few examples of company retirement policies and planning that include preparation for post-employment volunteering. However, community involvement can be encouraged and often develops in the course of an individual's working life. Participation in volunteering in later life is more likely to occur if people have experience in earlier years, so opportunities should be sought to promote volunteering more systematically during working years.

Targeted strategies on all levels are required to establish an appropriate framework for the meaningful inclusion of older people in volunteering. This should include the networking of relevant stakeholders at various levels to ensure the exchange of experience and information. In this context, as well as with respect to general support of initiatives and organisations at local level, local authorities are of special importance.

National promotional programmes and supportive legislation appear to be helpful and can stimulate action. However, without direct local backing mostly by local authorities, they are ineffective. A mix of strategies is most effective, both with regard to instruments (funding, infrastructure, support by professionals) and programmes. However, clear standards and support measures are necessary, particularly in developing initiatives that target socially excluded groups. Above all, a culture of recognition of the value of volunteering by older people, at local, national and EU levels, is essential.

Further information

The report, *Volunteering by older people in the EU*, is available online at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef1134.htm>

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