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Annette Angermann

# Senior Citizens and Volunteering in the European Union

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Office address: Zeilweg 42, 60439 Frankfurt a. M. – Germany  
Postal address: Postfach 50 01 51, 60391 Frankfurt a. M. – Germany  
Phone: +49 (0)69 - 95 78 9-0, Fax: +49 (0)69 - 95 789 190  
Internet: <http://www.iss-ffm.de>

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### The institutions operating the Observatory are:

Deutscher Verein für öffentliche und private Fürsorge e.V.  
German Association for Public and Private Welfare (DV)  
Michaelkirchstraße 17/18, 10179 Berlin - Germany  
Phone: +49 30-62980-0  
Fax: +49 30-62980-140  
Internet: <http://www.deutscher-verein.de>

Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik e.V. -  
Institute for Social Work and Social Education (ISS)  
Office address: Zeilweg 42, 60439 Frankfurt a. M. - Germany  
Postal address: Postfach 50 01 51, D-60391 Frankfurt a. M.  
Phone: +49 (0)69 - 95 78 9-0  
Fax: +49 (0)69 - 95 789 190  
Internet: <http://www.iss-ffm.de>

### Authors:

Annette Angermann ([angermann@deutscher-verein.de](mailto:angermann@deutscher-verein.de))

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## 1 Introduction

The topic of senior citizens volunteering offers a good opportunity to highlight the link between the European Years of 2011 (European Year of Voluntary Activities Promoting Active Citizenship 2011) and 2012 (European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012). On this occasion, the Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe has selected several EU Member States for a European comparison on senior citizens volunteering, and presented in this Background Paper<sup>1</sup> different examples of good practice from the following EU Member States: Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom.

## 2 Senior Citizens and Volunteering in Europe – Status Quo

European States are multifaceted, and so is volunteering in Europe. Looking beyond the borders, watching current developments of senior citizens' volunteering in different EU Member States, can be worthwhile because current trends and initiatives can trigger impulses for other European countries and promote European dialogue.

The Study by the European Commission on “Volunteering in the European Union” (GHK 2010a)<sup>2</sup> published in February 2010, which gives an overview of volunteering in all the 27 Member States of the European Union, is a major contribution to the objective of future comparability of volunteering. This, however, does not mean that the reports from the Member States are directly comparable with one another, but the study is a first step in the direction of future comparability because it tries to put the 27 national reports in proportion and gives at least a first impression on the landscape of civic engagement in Europe. Likewise, the European comparative studies which preceded the Commission's Study, such as the Eurovol Study (1995), the European Values Study (2001), the Eurobarometer “Social Reality” (2007) and the European Time Use Survey (2007) do not provide a uniform picture of actual volunteer behaviour and are therefore empirically comparable only to a limited extent.<sup>3</sup> The comparability problem has now been addressed by the American Johns Hopkins University: By means of the “European Volunteering Measurement Project”<sup>4</sup> it aims at developing a comparable data base of volunteer work on the basis of manuals and

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<sup>1</sup> Background Paper on the Expert Meeting “Active Ageing in Europe – Senior Citizens and Volunteering”, Expert Meeting on Innovative Policies for Senior Citizens and Generations, 28.11.2011 in Berlin.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the complete study with all the country reports in English, there is also a German summary available.

<sup>3</sup> The European comparative studies as well as national studies of the Member States are only partly comparable, because of their different approaches, i.e. different measuring techniques, measuring units and target groups (e.g. does the study include only formal forms of volunteering, or informal volunteering as well?)

<sup>4</sup> <http://evmp.eu/2011/07/06/warsaw-workshop-1/> and [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@stat/documents/publication/wcms\\_162119.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@stat/documents/publication/wcms_162119.pdf) (both as of 09.11.2011).

guidelines from the International Labour Organization (ILO), and in cooperation with national statistics offices.

After publication of the Commission's Study last year, the Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe has summarized the status quo of volunteering in the European Union in a Working Paper<sup>5</sup>, evaluating it mainly on the basis of volunteering measurements and reports as well as volunteer promotion programs and strategies.

Basically, as far as volunteering measurements and reports are concerned, the EU Member States can be divided into three categories: Those EU countries which produce official or public statistics, e.g. Germany and the United Kingdom<sup>6</sup> as well as Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden; those Member States which use scientific studies to collect data on volunteering, e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Poland, Finland, France, Luxemburg, and Latvia. Besides, Bulgaria, Estonia, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Malta use a variety of ways to collect, estimate and calculate data on volunteering.

#### Volunteer promotion programs and strategies in the EU Member States

Since volunteer activities most often take place at local level, they are of major importance particularly in those Member States which have a federal system or which have strong or autonomous regions, e.g. in Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

Apart from the actual numbers of volunteers, also the volunteer policies<sup>7</sup> of the individual States, i.e. their volunteer promotion programs and strategies, are an indicator of what the general conditions for volunteer activities in the relevant countries look like. A small number of countries have volunteer strategies (which set concrete goals). The majority of Member States make efforts to support the volunteer sector by means of various volunteer programs. In those States which have no clear volunteer strategy, policies concerning volunteering often are divided between a number of different policy fields, so that concrete political goals cannot be identified or can only implicitly be found.

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<sup>5</sup> Annette Angermann/Birgit Sittermann (2010): Volunteering in the Member States of the European Union – Evaluation and Summary of Current Studies. Available on the internet: [http://www.beobachtungsstelle-gesellschaftspolitik.de/uploads/tx\\_aebgppublications/Arbeitspapier\\_5\\_BEO\\_BE\\_in\\_27Eu-Mitgliedsstaaten\\_Nov2010.pdf](http://www.beobachtungsstelle-gesellschaftspolitik.de/uploads/tx_aebgppublications/Arbeitspapier_5_BEO_BE_in_27Eu-Mitgliedsstaaten_Nov2010.pdf) (as of 08.11.2011).

<sup>6</sup> Germany and the U.K. produce statistics on a regular basis.

<sup>7</sup> Germany is among those EU Member States which have an explicit national volunteer policy. On 6<sup>th</sup> October 2010, the German federal cabinet adopted a national volunteer strategy, which now forms the basis for promotion of volunteering and the further development of volunteer policy in Germany. Furthermore, Estonia, France and Belgium have developed volunteer strategies and/or promotion programs; the extent of specification of the relevant national strategy, however, differs from State to State.

### 3 Senior Citizens Volunteering in Europe

In total, there are 92-94 million adult volunteers in Europe, or 22-23% of the population of the European Union. As a result of different volunteer traditions, the volunteer sectors of each of the EU countries have developed differently. This is reflected by the numbers of volunteers. Whereas the rate of volunteering is very high among citizens of the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and the United Kingdom,<sup>8</sup> other States such as Denmark, Finland, Luxemburg and Germany have a high rate of volunteering,<sup>9</sup> and for other States such as Estonia, France and Latvia, the rate is not so high (GHK 2010a).<sup>10</sup> In Belgium, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia and Spain as well as in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, the percentage of volunteers is relatively low.<sup>11</sup> The lowest rate was found in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Lithuania.<sup>12</sup> It is evident that the different traditions in the individual States have a strong impact on the number of volunteers. In most Central and Eastern European States, from the post-war era after World War II until the beginning of the 1990s, volunteerism was “paralyzed”, or it was linked to political parties and often compulsory. At the beginning of the 1990s, many organizations had to be reestablished and therefore, the civil societies are sometimes still in the process of development. In some Member States, e.g. in Greece, a different attitude towards volunteering is dominant: people help one another within their own family and their circle of friends, so the rate of volunteerism is lower. (GHK 2010a)

For this Background Paper, the Observatory for Sociopolitical Developments in Europe has selected several European States which “represent” their respective “family of countries” in order to describe their examples of good practice: *Germany* and the *Netherlands* representing the Central European States; *Finland* representing northern Europe, *Poland* for the Mid-Eastern European EU States, *Spain* as a South European State, and the *United Kingdom* as an Anglo-Saxon State.

In many countries of the European Union, the number of elderly volunteers is rising. Apart from Finland and Spain, also e.g. Belgium, France, Austria, Romania, Slovenia, and Sweden should be mentioned in this context (GHK 2010b: 6). In some EU States, such as the Netherlands, there is a high rate of elderly volunteers already: 41% of 65-74-year-olds currently volunteer, and 24% of those over 75 years (GHK 2010a: 70 et. seq.). In Finland, 40% of 65-79-year-olds currently volunteer (Eurofound 2011: 15); as compared to earlier times, the rate of older volunteers has increased (GHK 2010\_FI). In Germany, the rate of volunteering by 60-69-year-olds is 37%, and for those over 70 years, is 25% (BMFSFJ 2010:

<sup>8</sup> More than 40% of the adult population currently volunteer.

<sup>9</sup> 30-39%

<sup>10</sup> 20-29%

<sup>11</sup> 10-19%

<sup>12</sup> less than 10%

32). In the United Kingdom, 30% of 65-74-year-olds and 20% of 75-year-olds currently volunteer<sup>13</sup> (Eurofound 2011: 14). No exact figures can be found for Spain but there, too, the number of elderly volunteers is rising (GHK 2010a, GHK 2010\_ES). In Poland, the rate of volunteering was steadily rising until 2007 but was decreasing considerably in 2008 (GHK 2010\_PL), which was probably due to the economic crisis. Since then, elderly persons in Poland have been more involved in caring for their own family members<sup>14</sup> (Eurofound 2011: 15).

The Netherlands and the United Kingdom are so-called “classic” volunteerism States, with a long and deep-rooted tradition of volunteering; so the relatively high rates of volunteers are not surprising. One example of good practice which should be mentioned here is “Zilveren Kracht” in the Netherlands - a well-known platform which provides general information on the issue of civic engagement of seniors as well as a project database, publications, and a partnership network. It highlights, among other things, the promotion of citizens’ initiatives, intergenerational activities, and active living and housing at old age.<sup>15</sup> Another interesting example of good practice is the IT Trainer Project in the United Kingdom, where volunteers help elderly persons to acquire IT knowledge to facilitate their access to modern technology and the internet.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the United Kingdom has numerous general websites which provide information for persons seeking volunteer opportunities.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the Polish Volunteer Centre provides information for Polish citizens (50 plus) who are interested in volunteering, about volunteerism for elderly persons as well as about organizations and institutions which are interested in volunteer work.<sup>18</sup> One of the aims of the Polish “Forum 50+” is to involve elderly persons more actively in political decision-making on matters concerning themselves, or to enhance their participation in such decision-making processes<sup>19</sup>. In Spain, in addition to the Yearbook about the Third Sector which was published in 2010 (available only in Spanish)<sup>20</sup> which provides data on volunteers, there is an information website for elderly people who are thinking about the possibility of volunteering.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Contrary to Germany, in the U.K. there are generally more women (28%) than men (23%) who volunteer.

<sup>14</sup> In particular, for children and grandchildren.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.zilverenkracht.nl>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.btplc.com/Responsiblebusiness/Supportingourcommunities/Digitalinclusion/BTinternetstrangers/index.htm>

<sup>17</sup> E.g. the website of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme (<http://www.csv-rsvp.org.uk/site/home.htm>). But also the “Cabinet Office – Office of the third sector” is helpful for getting an overview of public support available in the field of volunteer activity for older people ([http://www.kansalaisareena.fi/Workshop\\_B1\\_Knights\\_UK\\_en.pdf](http://www.kansalaisareena.fi/Workshop_B1_Knights_UK_en.pdf)).

<sup>18</sup> Information website from the Volunteer Centre: <http://www.wolontariat.org.pl/strona.php?p=1549>. This website shows e.g. a Regional Volunteer Centre in Slupsk, which is comparable to a multigenerational house, advising e.g. elderly persons to volunteer together with children.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.forum50.org/a/projekty/wlaczniek/0>

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.fundacionluisvives.org/upload/31/64/ANUARIO\\_FLV\\_PDF\\_NAVEGABLE.pdf](http://www.fundacionluisvives.org/upload/31/64/ANUARIO_FLV_PDF_NAVEGABLE.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.iniciativasocial.net/tercera.htm>

### Volunteering and persons in need of care

The German “Monitor Voluntary Activities – how and for what purposes do elderly people volunteer?”, which was published in 2011, points to the importance of volunteer work in the nursing care sector; moreover, it illustrates that multigenerational houses offer e.g. the possibility to share one’s experience, as well as help and care for persons suffering from dementia and their family members (BMFSFJ 2011). They offer help not only to those in need of care or suffering from dementia, but also to caregiving family members.<sup>22</sup> For example, the Multigenerational House in Cologne offers training courses for those who accompany people suffering from dementia.<sup>23</sup> A project which is offered by the Volunteer Agency of Stuttgart offers the possibility for volunteers to attend cultural events together with persons suffering from dementia.<sup>24</sup> The website of Alzheimer’s Society in the United Kingdom provides a forum for sharing one’s experience in handling people suffering from dementia – not just for caregiving family members or other (voluntary) caregivers but also for those who suffer from dementia.<sup>25</sup> The AGE Institute in Finland takes a scientific approach to the topic of volunteering from 2007-2012. The project “The Agency of Everyday Life of A Person with Dementia Living Alone” runs from 2011-2013. This is an interview-based study in which persons affected by dementia as well as important actors of everyday life are interviewed.<sup>26</sup> In 2007, the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport of the Netherlands published a “Strategy Paper on the care of family members and volunteer work 2008-2011”, which also deals with the issue of cooperation between family members and volunteers.<sup>27</sup>

## **4 Conclusion and Future Prospects**

As a result of demographic change and its challenges, high expectations are placed not only on young people but – especially in the field of volunteering – on the elderly as well. Older people are both providers and beneficiaries of volunteer work. Volunteer activities of older people take place both in the context of civil society organizations and in informal contexts, such as neighbourly help.

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<sup>22</sup> Multigenerational houses place the focus on mixed care arrangements made up of professional, family and voluntary support, i.e. combining the efforts of cooperation partners from the field of nursing care and volunteers. In addition, they offer programs for caring family members. This, in the field of nursing care and dementia, helps to complement the local infrastructure, to facilitate the compatibility of nursing care/family and job/career, and to improve the life quality of persons in need of care or suffering from dementia.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.mehrgenerationenhaeuser.de>

<sup>24</sup> The Initiative „RosenResli“ provides information e.g. on.: visits to cultural events together with people with dementia. The aim is to help them enjoy life and participate in social life ([www.stuttgart.de/freiwilligenagentur](http://www.stuttgart.de/freiwilligenagentur)).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents.php?categoryID=200352>

However, here it needs to be clarified how volunteerism is to be distinguished from self-help.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.ikainstituutti.fi/in+english/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.engagement-conference.info/resources/Strategiepapier.pdf>

Basically, one can say that volunteer work of elderly people takes place in different organizational forms. The most important platform for volunteer work is offered by associations or clubs – this is true for any age group. The second largest field of volunteer activity is offered by church institutions or religious communities, which are becoming more important with increasing age and reach their peak for the very old.

So far, senior citizens' volunteering is not often mentioned in public debate; old age is usually perceived more or less as a consumptive phase of life. Basically this is due to the fact that gainful employment offers a wide range of opportunity structures for volunteer activities. Gainful employment and volunteering often are very close to each other, so it is not surprising that gainfully employed persons make up the highest rate of volunteers among the "younger" old people. As this correlation changes at the time of retirement from working life, it is not surprising that the rate of volunteering changes with increasing age (BMFSFJ 2011: 8).

As far as preferences for particular fields of volunteer activity are concerned, elderly people do not differ significantly from the average population. There are marked differences, however, in those fields of activity which are not so much concerned with the sphere of life of the elderly<sup>28</sup>, or which enjoy popularity due to a particular age group<sup>29</sup>. In most cases, the target group of volunteer work performed by older people are old people who are in need of help, suffering from dementia, or lonely, who live at home or in residential care (Kahler 2011). This type of volunteer work is very important; however, it is not possible for volunteers to provide adequate care for those who are dependent on care, neither from the qualitative nor from the quantitative aspects (Warmbrunn 2011). Because of shortage of staff, it often seems that volunteers are instrumentalized and are used as a stopgap to make up for the cuts in social benefits. In the nursing care sector, another aspect is that many of those who are employed there had chosen this profession because of the social and inter-human component, and now they are faced with the fact that this part of their work is done by volunteers.

The second largest target group for elderly volunteering, after nursing care, are children and youths. This can be an expression of intergenerational responsibility.<sup>30</sup>

In order to meet the demand of elderly persons to volunteer, it is necessary to define the roles and fields of activity of employed staff and those of volunteers, and to provide guidance for interaction between these two different groups. Suitable general conditions have to be put in place. Because the willingness to volunteer is hampered by a conjunction of various circumstances and developments of society as a whole, such as longer working life resulting

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<sup>28</sup> School/Kindergarden

<sup>29</sup> Social welfare and health care sector, church/religion

in reduced time resources, reduced income of old people and the need for additional earnings, continuing individualization of society, etc.

Even though the potential of older people as volunteers may not yet have become an issue of public debate in all its aspects, the European Year 2011 as well as preparatory work for the European Year 2012 have shown us that the topic of elderly volunteering has more and more become the focus of public attention. It is a chance to discuss this topic further and, wherever necessary, to put in place suitable conditions and infrastructure so that the essence of the European Years 2011 and 2012 can yield results beyond their political-symbolic level.

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<sup>30</sup> Examples for intergenerational volunteer activity are the reading tutoring programs or volunteer grandmothers/volunteer grandfathers (BMFSFJ 2011: 12 et.seq.).

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