



Volunteer Centres and Volunteering Infrastructure European Examples

Report for
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Peter Hilger

peter.hilger@helsinki.fi

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Abstract: Volunteering infrastructure is essential for the advancement of volunteering. Cross-sectoral support infrastructure is particularly important to develop volunteering as a civic activity. This report introduces central developments in three European countries, England, Germany and the Netherlands, where volunteering has acquired much public attention. Volunteer development centres are presented as one element of volunteering infrastructure, but also more general issues of support infrastructure are taken up.

1. Volunteering

We understand volunteering as spending time to benefit a third party without receiving payment for it.¹ The activity is carried out the basis of a free decision, and the beneficial can, for example, be the environment or a person, but not a close relative. On occasion of the International Year of Volunteers in 2001 the United Nations introduced a broader definition stressing that voluntary activity is carried out not primarily for financial reasons. The UN lists four forms in which volunteering occurs. These are mutual- or self-help, philanthropy or service to others, participation or civic engagement and advocacy or campaigning.

There are different aspects to volunteering such as help and service provision, participation and advocacy, self-expression or social contact. We might distinguish between three major types of benefits we associate with volunteering:

- Social cohesion through contacts among people. Social capital is built by volunteer activity.
- The fostering of a citizenship status: People shape their environment through volunteer activity and participate in society.
- The provision of services: Volunteering often consists of services that are produced for fellow citizens when helping or assisting them through an activity.

In many countries there is a long tradition of volunteering. It often goes back to communities and guilds of the middle ages, to socio-cultural milieus (e.g. catholic, protestant, workers) or charity of higher classes in the 19th century. Recently, the mode of volunteering is increasingly changing from traditional, altruistic involvement towards selective, temporal and projects based engagement with the expectation of some kind of reward (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003). Activities are professionalising, sometimes eating off space for volunteers. Less people grow into engagement through traditions passed on by their parents. They rather choose projects for a limited period of time and move on after a task is fulfilled or something more interesting pops up. More often than before, people expect some kind of reward instead of being ready to dutifully serve an organisation.

In short, the mode of engagement is changing to a certain extent and opportunities to volunteer take a different shape. Traditional volunteering was usually affiliated with an organisation; contact

¹ For the following see for example the definitions according to the English Compact Code for Good Practice in Volunteering or the United National International Year of Volunteering 2001 <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/4C135BDF-E1E2-43D4-8FD8-DB16AE4536AA/0/DefinitionsofVolunteeringVE08.pdf> (5.2.2010)

emerged out of traditions or contacts through relatives, friends and close network relations. Today volunteering is not necessarily affiliated with an organisation. Membership in an association therefore has to be distinguished from activity. The input of a member can vary greatly. Some simply pay a membership fee; others meet to carry out activities. The perspective on volunteering focuses on activities instead of membership.

In Finland the debate on volunteering oscillates between two poles. On the one hand, volunteer activity is deeply rooted in Finnish society. The rural tradition of mutual neighbourhood help (“talkoo”) is well alive and was even transferred to some extent to city life. This partly has the consequence that people do not always recognise volunteering as such because it is very common and well integrated into everyday life. On the other hand, associations are well established and exist in almost every sphere of society. Consequently people easily associate volunteering with membership or activity within organisations and tend to forget about activities outside of this frame. According to international comparative studies volunteering in Finland can be characterised by three features:

- The number of associations and extent of membership rank among the higher ones in Europe, but activity in membership is considerably lower than in a number of other countries (see Grönlund and Setälä 2006, 164).
- The overall level of volunteering seems to be somewhat lower than in other Nordic and a number of other European countries.²
- As regards associations, volunteering is concentrated in the fields of culture and recreation, in particular sports, as well as in advocacy and civic affairs, whereas in the other fields a combination of passive membership and professionalised, paid activity prevails (see Helander et al. 1999, 72).

Against the historical background and empirical evidence we can speak of a strong membership culture that characterises Finnish civil society. Within organisations and within particular sectors volunteering has a steady position, and to some extent also a supporting structures have been established. Associations have started "in-house volunteer bureaus" in order to match volunteer effort to places of need or tasks within their own organisation. An example is the Finnish Red Cross that established such an internal service already in the 1950s.

² The Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (2004):
http://www.ccss.jhu.edu/pdfs/CNP/CNP_table201.pdf (5.2.2010)

One recent challenge, however, is to strengthen volunteering as a citizen activity independent of the particular sector it is located in. One significant factor to support volunteering cross-horizontally is the development of an effective volunteering infrastructure. Volunteer centres are one example of organisations that support volunteering in general and match volunteers to opportunities outside the own organisation. They horizontally serve other places and organisations in society. Volunteer Centres are centred around volunteers. They have different profiles ranging from brokerage alone to several complex functions such as support for organisations, public awareness for volunteering or policy advice. We will take a look at three European examples to shed light on some features that can be central to the development of a functioning volunteering infrastructure. For each of the three countries, England, Germany and the Netherlands, the general framework and an example from one city is presented. We will conclude this report with a list of general infrastructural issues that have been significant in these countries.

2. Examples from selected European countries

2.1 England: a unified support system

In England the notion of the voluntary sector as one entity emerged in the late 1970s. Several reports on volunteering raised attention for the issue and by the late 1990s the New Labour government had put the support of civil society on the agenda. A major step was the establishment of a Compact between the voluntary sector and the government in 1998. This document committed both parties to cooperate, support and inform each other on questions concerning volunteering. The objective was to enhance the status of engaged citizens and enable them to carry out voluntary activities by offering necessary support. Partly these were central measures; part of the strategy was a better cooperation between local government and local level volunteer organisations.

A number of nationwide projects were carried out. Millennium Volunteers was targeted towards youth, Experience Corps addressed elderly people. Time-Bank is a project to exchange volunteer services and Do-It is an internet-based brokerage tool that matches volunteers with places of need. Currently the ChangeUp programme is most the most significant support framework.

In order to create a unified approach to volunteering in 2004 three umbrella organisations merged into Volunteering England, the new peak organisation. It receives funding from the Active

Community Unit of the Home Office and a number of other supporters. It acts as a secretary for the English Volunteer Development Council (EVDC) which represents the voluntary sector. It is also the volunteer Hub that coordinates support and research on volunteering on behalf of the government. At the same time a ten-year strategy document was issued. The “Building on Success”-report defined the new, encompassing approach towards volunteering.³ It introduced volunteering infrastructure and took account of the structure of existing volunteer development centres. This report also defined six core functions for volunteer centres. These are:

- Brokerage
- Marketing
- Good practice development
- Developing volunteer opportunities
- Policy response and campaigning
- Strategic development

Local volunteer centres were the central organisations to implement this strategy. Volunteering has a long but heterogeneous tradition in England. Different types of voluntary action, philanthropy, charity etc. have coexisted side by side. Volunteer centres were to coordinate wishes to volunteer. The first volunteer centres appeared early in the 20th century. In 1972 there were already 28 local volunteer centres. Today there are more than 400. The strategy of Volunteering England is to establish one volunteer centre in every county or city. By now most local volunteer centres are a member of Volunteering England. This organisation provides for a common outfit and a guided organisational structure. On average, local volunteer centres are financed by more than half of their budget by local governments. However, this is not structural funding but often project related money. One fourth is provided by other third sector organisations. Central government and the National Health Service contribute another five per cent each (Howlett 2008, 13).

The central unit of Volunteering England coordinates policy and links stakeholders, it disseminates information, supports volunteer involving and matching organisations, organises the accreditation of volunteer centres, hosts research and develops strategy further.

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<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/VolunteeringEngland/Core/RecordedResource.aspx?resource=1d722c0c07c94599b9e640de0a468abe> (5.2.2010).

The “one centre-policy” on the local level is a consequence of a perception of volunteer centres as a significant municipal infrastructure. This should also guarantee a certain standard. Already in 2002 the Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation was introduced. Now almost 400 Volunteer Centres have completed this accreditation process. It means adopting the six volunteer centre functions and a commitment to quality standards. Branding and support enables the centres to adopt a professional or semi-professional organisational structure and appearance. Usually local centres are not the only volunteer matching organisation in a municipality but they develop into the most important node with respect to volunteering.

In the city of Colchester, a city of 100.000 inhabitants, the volunteer centre cooperates with the Council of Voluntary Organisation (CVO) which provides for legal advice, accounting and trustees for associations and charities. The volunteer centre works on a more tangible level. It involves volunteers and consults organisations, businesses and the public sector. It has five employees, some partly act as volunteers. The centre is located inside the building of an environmental initiative. Its opening hours are Mondays to Wednesdays from 10-16.00. Mainly the centre deals with “first time volunteers”. Additional matching is done through an internet database. The centre also runs the local branch of the all-England Time Bank for the exchange of volunteer effort. Matching, training and the consultation of organisations are the centre’s central activities. It has mixed funding and runs additional service projects, e.g. for the public sector, in order to fill gaps in the community. It uses these projects to receive additional funding.

2.2 Germany: a heterogeneous support system

In Germany volunteering is usually debated as work in an honorary office (Ehrenamt). This goes back to the reform of local government in the early 19th century. Together with the welfare principle of subsidiarity, meaning a higher level intervenes only after a lower level failed, volunteer organisations are an integral part of local welfare services. Today there is a dual voluntary sector with a few big, traditional welfare associations (e.g. the Workers’ Welfare Association, the protestant Diakonia, the catholic Caritas) and many smaller, diverse, often social movement related organisations (Zimmer 1999).

Volunteering gained increased significance in the 1990s when a change in the mode of volunteering was detected. This led to a scientific and since the turn of the millennium also a political debate on

the future of volunteering (Hilger 2007). This was carried out within the concept of civic engagement which included social, political, cultural, environmental and other forms of engagement. A parliamentary enquiry commission conducted encompassing research work and led to the establishment of a sub-commission of the parliament and a sub-department within the federal government. Similar developments have taken place in several regions, the so called Bundesländer.

The National Network for Civil Society (BBE) links the public, the third and the business sector with each other. It works strategically by providing information and lobbying as well as organising conferences. The first volunteer centre was established 1979 in Munich but the 1990s saw a boom of such centres. They started off as mere brokerage organisations, but by their functions have enlarged and many of them now acquire a broader profile as volunteer development agencies. The umbrella organisation BAGFA, founded in 1999, supports member volunteer centres with coordination, strategic development, quality management and lobbying. Since Germany is a federal state, this structure is multiplied by regional umbrella organisations. There are about 300 volunteer centres. These local centres have very different organisational structures. Some are part of the municipal administration, some are run by one of the big welfare associations, others again are a cooperation of welfare association and/or other local partners. Altogether the volunteer support system is rather heterogeneous even though there are clear nationwide structures.

In 2005 a quality seal was introduced. This accreditation system investigates core and additional functions. These are:

- Informing/advising volunteers
- Informing/advising organisations
- Internal human resource development
- The volunteer centre's internal work structures
- Public relations
- Quality management

Additional functions are cooperation with companies, developing external skills, development of new services, finance, official volunteer services (legally codified services for a longer period, mainly for younger persons). By 2009 there were about 60 accredited volunteer centres.

The city of Hannover has about 500.000 inhabitants. The local volunteer centre has been established in 1999 with the objective to combine local capacities in volunteer support. The centre is a

cooperation of a number of large organisations such as the Workers' Welfare Association, the catholic Caritas, the protestant church, a number of smaller local associations as well as social enterprises and even some local businesses like the main regional newspaper, an insurance company and other firms. The initiative was started by a small group of main actors and enlarged in the course of the centres existence.

The centre is active in recruiting, matching, training and support of volunteers, information for and consultation of organisations and it carries out an array of own projects to involve volunteers. Like many centres today, it also runs an additional internet database to match volunteers. The centre has five employees of whom some are financed by acquired projects. The centre has mainly worked on the basis of annual budgets for which it has to apply every year. It has moved three times and is now located in the centre of the city in the building of the municipal public transport company. Its opening hours are Mondays to Fridays from 10 to 18 o'clock and Saturdays from 10 to 16 o'clock.

2.3 The Netherlands: a semi-public support system

The Netherlands have a subsidiarian welfare system that is based on several main pillars (Dekker 2004). All major welfare services are organised independently within these realms of society. As a result there is a parallel structure for the protestant-calvinist, the catholic, the socialist, the liberal and other social milieus in society. They all have formed their own organisations. One consequence of such a system is a high degree of self-organisation of society inside these pillars. Usually services are produced in interdependence between the public and the civic sector.

The first volunteer centres have been established in 1972 in the cities of Tilburg and Arnhem. It was a public sector experiment. These centres continued to work and others were established later on. These local organisations were first based on central government support. Since 1987, however, local governmental got the responsibility for volunteer centres. One central issue in the work of these centres has been the activation of unemployed persons. Another current issue is the integration of persons with a background of migration as part of a general concern for equal participation.

The Dutch system has undergone changes but is rather unified since it is based on national legislation and local community financing. The National Association of Dutch Voluntary Effort

(NOV) acts as a spokesperson, mediator and lobbyist for two types of organisations. One are volunteer involving organisations and the other are matching organisations, i.e. volunteer centres. NOV has about 350 members. The Centre for Social Development (MOVISIE) offers advice, coordinates support measures within the welfare sector and one of its tasks is to implement NOV's volunteer policy on the national level. Half of its budget comes from the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports.

The public sector is strongly involved in welfare related volunteering. The Social Service Act of 2007 obliges municipalities to support volunteering. They have to develop a policy to support volunteering and review their activity. Usually local volunteer centres implement this policy. There is a national centre for volunteer support; there are provincial centres and about 300 local support centres.

The National Association of Dutch Voluntary Effort has introduced a Volunteer Centre Quality Mark in 1999. Today other competing quality marks exist. Since 2005 NOV's Quality Award measures achievements of volunteer centres in the following areas:

- Success of work with volunteers
- Attractivity for volunteers
- Improvement of output

About 50 volunteer centres had been evaluated until 2009.

The city of Arnhem has about 150.000 inhabitants. Its volunteer centre was established in 1972. Today it has seven employees; some of them work on a part-time basis. Its main functions are:

- supply of voluntary care and services
- expression of active citizenship
- social participation
- enhancement of social cohesion and trust

Further it offers advice and consultation for volunteers, the municipality and organisations. It also carries out projects for the municipality and for other organisations. Matching of volunteers is increasingly done through an internet database. More than two thirds of its budget stem from the municipality. Half of its budget is structural funding from the city of Arnhem, the rest is related to projects. The centre's opening hours are Mondays to Fridays from 12 to 16 o'clock. With respect to

volunteer support the Netherlands can be called a semi-public system where significant regulation on public funding combines with independent volunteer centres.

3. General infrastructural issues

Volunteering infrastructure has developed significantly in the last decade. The three countries presented here have made clear advances during this period. Although the degree of unity differs, all countries had a public debate that was helpful in organising their volunteering infrastructure. Among other issues that will be discussed below, volunteer centres are a central element of volunteering infrastructure. The centres have originally been established in order to match volunteers with places of need in society. Today, however, their role has changed significantly. This is reflected in the catalogue of functions these centres carry out as well as in the label they often carry. Today they often prefer the label volunteer development agencies instead of volunteer centres. This expresses their mission which goes beyond brokerage and includes support for volunteering and its advancement in society in general.

Their activities are centred on volunteers. Volunteers are served as citizens and act as citizens in carrying out volunteer activity. As such these centres do not serve a particular organisation or sector in society. Rather they cooperate with organisations from different sectors and try to improve the conditions for volunteering within a certain region. Sometimes their broader function as volunteering development agencies beyond matching suffers from demand overload. Although the centres are considered to be a part of the municipal civic infrastructure, they are usually small and, in many cases, have to struggle regularly with funding. Thus, they are not always able to carry out all the functions they are committed to.

One central strategy in the establishment of volunteer centres is cooperation with other associations to overcome competition for volunteers. Often volunteer centres deal with matching of first time volunteers and general support; this means they complement the work of other associations that involve volunteers. To achieve this it is important to get recognition of the local public administration. A significant step was taken in England where the Compact of 1998 obliges as a formal agreement on cooperation the voluntary and the public sector to cooperate constructively. Similar agreements exist on the regional and the local level.

Central is the question of financial support. The Dutch Social Service Act guarantees a certain amount of funding. Also centres in other countries usually use a significant amount of public funding, but that is not always the case. Where it is the case, support is often granted as annual funding which makes it difficult to plan activities in advance on a long term basis. Virtually all volunteer centres carry out additional projects which are often also used to co-subsidise and secure their basic infrastructure.

There are a number of legal arrangements that have an impact on volunteering. One can distinguish between direct and indirect legislation (Igl 2002). Rarely countries have an explicit volunteer legislation. Direct legislation exists in the form of an associations, charities or foundations act. Indirect influence is exercised by the nature of the welfare system, municipal and budgetary law. These all influence the general conditions for volunteering. The same is true for employment regulation, e.g. the common amount of work hours per week.

More direct influence stems from tax law. Significant issues are opportunities to deduce allowances or donations from one's taxable income. The Netherlands for example accept allowances of up to 1500 Euro to remain untaxed. A central issue for volunteers is damage liability and accident insurance. Depending on the social security system there can be a general insurance in case of illness or accident. If that is not the case, municipalities or peak associations have negotiated special contracts with insurance companies. There have also been debates about the granting of further advantages for volunteers. Such are additional benefits in old-age pensions or educational bonuses for students, but they have not been brought into effect.

In all three countries there has been a debate on the treatment of unemployed persons who volunteer. Essential is that these persons remain available for placement on the labour market. For that reason there is usually a maximum amount of hours per week they are allowed to spend on volunteer activities. However, all three countries have lifted this amount. In Germany, under certain conditions unemployed persons have to accept a semi-volunteer activity, so called 1-Euro-Jobs, if they do not want to lose their unemployment allowance. This measure has been rather controversial.

In England a criminal record check was introduced recently. Volunteers have to present a clearance certificate from a central register when they carry out certain activities with vulnerable groups, e.g. children.

Other, more general infrastructure issues are research into volunteering and its impact. Virtually all countries that put volunteering on the political agenda discovered a need for deeper knowledge on the scale and context of volunteering. At least England and Germany have established a periodic national volunteer survey. Additional expert groups and parliamentary commissions or governmental departments have been established to facilitate the coordination of policy initiatives on volunteering.

In all three countries there is a structure that links national with local volunteer support bodies. Usually a national body for coordination works with local bodies for coordination and implementation. Significant is the shift from local volunteer centres to volunteer development agencies with the agenda to serve different sectors and organisations. Matching remains a core activity, but on the other hand, it more and more moves into the virtual space of the internet. Databases enable citizens to search for open places and provide organisations with the opportunity to offer such places. All tangible support, however, is handled by volunteer supporting organisations. These cover the functions of general advancement of and information on volunteering, training, consultation of organisations and strategic and policy development.

All of this is complemented by strategies to improve public awareness of volunteering. Significant changes can be detected in the scope of symbolic measures of recognition for volunteering. It is common to issue certificates and awards for the appreciation of volunteers or to celebrate days of the volunteer. These are signals of a general acknowledgment of volunteering as a civic activity regardless of the sector it occurs in.

Literature

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Internet resources

The Compact:

<http://www.thecompact.org.uk/>

Volunteering England:

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/>

National Network for Civil Society (BBE):

http://www.b-b-e.de/bbe_english.html

German federal working group of volunteer agencies:

<http://bagfa.de>

The Netherlands centre for social development (MOVISIE):

<http://www.movisie.nl/eCache/ENG/1/15/032.html>

The National Association of Dutch Voluntary Effort:

<http://www.nov.nl/eCache/DEF/1/22/793.html>

CEV (The European Volunteer Centre, Centre européen du volontariat) Facts & Figures reports:

http://www.cev.be/66-cev_facts_e_figures_reports_-EN.html