



## STATEMENT

### Volunteering and social services in times of austerity

**Eurodiaconia has become extremely concerned about a current discourse that has emerged in response to the economic and financial crisis, namely that volunteering should be a means to cushion the impact of the financial crisis, especially in times of austerity measures and cuts in public spending. 2011 is the European Year of Volunteering, and whilst Eurodiaconia wants to use this Year to promote volunteering and recruit more volunteers, we want to raise awareness of the dangers of this discourse and why it could be harmful to European social and health care services and consequently European citizens.**

➤ **Volunteers are not a substitute for paid professional staff**

Eurodiaconia would like to stress that volunteers should never substitute paid professional staff in social and health care services. Whilst volunteers are of great importance in diaconal organisations and can increase the quality of service provision; their role must be seen as complimentary to the professional staff, not a cheap alternative human resource. We recognise that some particular services rely heavily on volunteers and are successfully managed in this way, but this is by no means a model that works or is desirable for all social and health care services. Europe has always been renowned for its strong social model and high standards of care and therefore shortcutting on professional staff in core social and health care services is something to avoid if we want to maintain these standards. Furthermore there should always be a clear distinction between the role and responsibilities of volunteers and paid staff which requires careful human resource management. This temptation to abuse the good will of volunteers is unfortunately not a new phenomenon; but in times of crisis, we recognise that the temptation is even stronger. It is vital that volunteers are not viewed by policy makers as cheap labour to help reduce public expenditure in difficult financial times.

➤ **Volunteering is not cost free**

Volunteers give their time freely; however there is a common misconception that volunteering is cost free. Volunteer structures usually require professional and thus paid management and there are necessary expenditures such as covering the travel costs or meals of the volunteer when undertaking voluntary work. Our members often say that an obstacle to recruiting more volunteers is due to not being able to pay a staff member to manage the volunteers. Governments cannot hand over responsibilities to volunteer-run organisations without giving them the financial support necessary for the service to be carried out at a professional standard. NGOs that provide important social services should be recognised for their provision of quality care and receive adequate financial support to carry this out.





## ➤ **Volunteering is freely given**

Eurodiaconia also firmly believes that volunteering should never become obligatory but is given of free will. The tradition of volunteering is generally different in former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe where volunteering simply did not exist as we know it today or in some countries it was obligatory. The consequence we see now is that many citizens have a negative attitude towards volunteering and thus civil society organisations are desperately trying to create a more positive image of it. Due to this lack of volunteering culture, many of these societies are now missing out on all the benefits of volunteering such as its important role in building social cohesion. This ‘forced’ approach to volunteering is something we must avoid repeating and presents a particular threat when unemployment rates are soaring across Europe.

## ➤ **We need to protect the European Social Model**

If we are serious about being a Social Europe then we need to protect the European Social Model and our social and health care services from the impact of the crisis. The social sector must not become a second rate sector run on the cheap and the state must not look for ways to shrink away from their responsibility of providing social and health care for its citizens. Public responsibility and therefore public financial commitment is necessary at all levels of government to ensure access for all to social services and that service providers are able to provide quality services.<sup>1</sup>

Volunteering is of great value to European societies. It plays an important role in promoting social inclusion, lifelong learning, personal development and wellbeing, intercultural and intergenerational dialogue, community building and much more. When in its right place, volunteering can have an important role in strengthening societies in difficult economic times. However if we miss the real value of volunteering and lose the trust of volunteers, we might start losing our volunteers altogether and harming our social and health care systems at the same time.

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For more information on Eurodiaconia’s volunteering policy see here <http://www.eurodiaconia.org/our-work/volunteering>

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<sup>1</sup> Eurodiaconia policy paper on social services  
[http://www.eurodiaconia.org/files/Eurodiaconia\\_policy\\_papers\\_and\\_briefings/SERV\\_22\\_09\\_Policy\\_paper\\_-\\_social\\_services.pdf](http://www.eurodiaconia.org/files/Eurodiaconia_policy_papers_and_briefings/SERV_22_09_Policy_paper_-_social_services.pdf)