United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV)

POSITION OF THE EUROPEAN VOLUNTEER CENTRE (CEV) ON *"VOLUNTEERING AND THE NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECNOLOGIES"*

Regarding: **International Telecommunication Union (ITU) World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)**
Geneva 2003
Tunis 2005

The European Volunteer Centre (CEV) is delighted that *"volunteering and the new information and communication technologies"* is being considered as a main theme of the civil society bureau of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva 2003. We are pleased to lend our full support to this initiative and would like to take this opportunity to outline why we, as a network of 26 National and Regional Volunteer Development Centres across 21 countries in Europe, believe that the theme of *"volunteering and the new information and communication technologies"* merits serious consideration by the Official Selection Committee of PrepCom-2.

The European Volunteer Centre, together with its membership of 26 National and Regional Volunteer Development Organisations across 21 countries in Europe, represents thousands of volunteer organisations, volunteer bureaux and individual volunteers across the Continent. The key aims of the organisation are:

- To be the voice for volunteering in Europe;
- To strengthen the infrastructure for volunteering in the countries of Europe;
- To promote volunteering and make it more effective.

CEV has exploited, and is keen to exploit further, the use of new information and communication technologies to help achieve our core aims.

The European Volunteer Centre

In July 2001, CEV members were asked during a comprehensive survey what they hoped to gain from membership of the CEV network, the answers to this were clear:

- Information they cannot ordinarily get hold of, such as examples good policy, practice and innovation in other European countries and conversely examples of policies and practices that have failed;
- Information on policy developments within the European Union in the field of volunteering;

- Identification of issues that are pan-European, acting together and individually on issues of importance;
- A focus for networking.

In this context, the new information and communication technologies can play an important role in informing, building the capacity of, and connecting our membership. CEV therefore developed, very recently, a monthly electronic news bulletin, *"CEV News"* as well as comprehensively redeveloped its website to more effectively support members.

For CEV members, the **electronic newsletter** is multi-functional. In providing information on policy developments within the European Union and how they impact upon the volunteer sector at national level, members' capacity on E.U. matters is enhanced. They are able to respond, both individually and collectively, to policy developments which they feel may impact negatively upon the development of the volunteer sector as well as make a greater call for increased commitment on the part of policy-makers, businesses, the media and the general public for volunteerism. Members also receive information on each others' activities often forging close partnerships to submit joint applications for funding as well as working together on specific projects and exchanging staff members or simply finding out more about a particular issue.

The **CEV website** meanwhile responds to both the needs of members as well as those outside the network by furnishing detailed information and official documentation on policy developments within the European Union as well as basic information on the history, aims and activities of the organisation, staff members etc.. It also provides details on the wide range of volunteer opportunities databases that have sprung up in recent years across Europe increasing avenues for participation in volunteer activities. CEV's **immediate priorities** with regard its website include expanding it much further to include a "members-only" section as well as French and Spanish translations.

In this context, the new information and communication technologies such as the email and Internet are important vehicles for expanding democratic communication, participation and information exchange.

CEV's **present and future priorities** in the field of new information and communication technologies will focus on **innovation**: finding new and better, more effective ways of doing our work, including through the innovative use of I.C.T resources. For example, bringing **campaigns and appeals** to the Internet. We would welcome, in this context, the opportunity to discuss these ideas further with colleagues at the ITU WSIS, Geneva 2003.

Many members are also keen to explore the possibilities of using **on-line volunteering** as a tool to attract younger people to volunteering. Those working within the volunteer sector in Europe are presently facing an enormous challenge. Whilst the number of older persons becoming involved in volunteer work is on the increase within Europe (the big success story in volunteering), there is conversely much evidence which indicates that fewer young people are becoming involved and that organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to attract young people to volunteering.

The reasons for this are diverse. Often volunteering suffers from out-dated associations with worthy philanthropy and conjures images that do not appeal to the young. Also, given demanding study and work commitments, flexibility is given top priority by young people, particularly in respect of flexible work and working times for volunteering. Variety is also an obvious and widely recognised requirement as are relevant and interesting experiences which will stand a young person in good stead in their personal and career development. Socio-economic and cultural barriers to volunteering also persist despite efforts to widen access. If volunteering is to attract the widest possible range of young people and achieve a true diversity which reflects the modern multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies in which we live, it must respond effectively to these new challenges.

On-line volunteering (that is, volunteering without ever leaving home!) represents just one possibility for increased participation of younger people in volunteer activities. Organisations such as *"NetAid On-line Volunteering"* which connects volunteers to poverty-fighting organisations around the world via the Internet provides a wealth of diverse opportunities to do volunteer research, writing, programming, networking and other activities from home. At the same time however, we must ask ourselves how we widen access to this

new information and communication technology to include all schools, colleges, universities, businesses and homes etc. that need, and would benefit greatly from, it.

In this context, CEV's present and future focus will also be on harnessing the tremendous possibilities offered by the new information and communication technologies for **social inclusion and lifelong learning**, working in cooperation with the Institutions of the European Union and national governments to make this happen.

In March 2000, the European Union Member States adopted the strategic goal of becoming, by 2010, *"the most competitive, dynamic, knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustained economic growth, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion."* Both volunteering (as a means of democratic participation and social inclusion, tool for lifelong-learning and greater employability) and the new information and communication technologies (as a means to grant everyone instant access to the world's knowledge and the capability to instantly share any new knowledge) will have important roles to play in achieving this objective. We would be keen to explore further with colleagues avenues through which both volunteering and I.C.T. can be best harnessed to achieve the objectives of greater social cohesion, learning and knowledge for the European Union and the associated countries.

CEV has done some work on this. In particular, we have looked at how best to develop and expand *"employer-supported volunteering"* or *"employee volunteering"* programmes across Europe, programmes which can bring to local communities new volunteers with skills, expertise or resources, including in the field of I.C.T., to help solve community problems. The challenge lies in securing the active support of the E.U. Institutions and national governments for such initiatives, and in convincing businesses that they may be able to effectively respond to the needs of local organisations and communities, including in the field of I.C.T., in ways that are integral to their business. See attached documentation for further information on this.

The United Nations International Year of Volunteers 2001

The United Nations International Year of Volunteers 2001 (IYV 2001) was the first United Nations International Year in which **new information and communication technologies played a major role**. Indeed IYV 2001 is often heralded as *"one of the first International Years to be truly web-based"* (Institute for Volunteering Research, UK) with a host of websites being developed by many individual countries. IYV2001 had as its four main goals the promotion, facilitation, networking and recognition of volunteers and of volunteer contributions around the world. Websites were typically used to provide information on volunteering and volunteer opportunities thereby helping in the promotion and recognition of volunteering. E-mail was widely used by voluntary organisations to network among themselves during the International Year while many volunteer managers made use of e-mail to recruit and train their volunteers greatly facilitating volunteering and its further development (see box below). Voluntary Service Organisations offering transnational voluntary service placements have also heralded the Internet and email as a means to maintain constant contact with field-operatives, while at the same time, an increasing number of volunteer placements are about transferring I.C.T. skills to local communities. United Nations Volunteers offers one such programme for example.

The challenge to the international volunteer community in the wake of the International Year is how to carry-on building on these important achievements (in many countries prior to the International Year, recognition of voluntary action was extremely limited or even nil but a record number of countries signed up to the International Year of Volunteers 2001 and to the four aims of promotion, facilitation, networking and recognition of volunteers and volunteer contributions), for example keeping websites up-to-date and informative with limited resources, maintaining partnerships etc..

Final Thoughts

The result of the information and communication revolution is remarkable opportunities as well as significant new challenges. For the volunteer sector, which must seek to build on the great achievements of the International Year of Volunteers 2001, the possibility to discuss practical ways to best harness both volunteering and the new information and communication technologies for the benefit of communities and society is an important one. CEV, and its membership would like to lend its support to the proposal that

"volunteering and the new information and communication technologies" be a main theme of the civil society bureau of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva 2003.

Volunteer Managers

Increasingly, volunteer managers are turning to the new information and communication technologies to help them stay in touch with current and potential volunteers. With the advent of computer technology, the volunteer managers' communication toolkit has expanded possibilities. Such tools as Internet recruitment (via volunteer opportunities databases), e-mail communication, virtual volunteering and on-line training are all having a major impact on the way we recruit and manage volunteers. At the same time however, it is true that not everyone agrees on how, when and why they should be used. Some critics argue that not everyone has equal access to this new technology, and even its use can be a barrier itself to those not technically inclined. The volunteer sector must therefore ask itself some very important questions. How do we move forward and make good use of these new tools, without leaving behind those with no access or desire to use this new technology?

The European Volunteer Centre is a Brussels-based umbrella organisation of 26 National and Regional Volunteer Development Centres across 21 countries in Europe. The key aims of the organisation are:

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- To strengthen the infrastructure for volunteering in the countries of Europe;
- To promote volunteering and make it more effective.

For more information, contact:

CEV,   Tel : (32 2) 511 75 01
Rue de l'Industrie 42/10,   Fax: (32 2) 514 59 89
B-1040 Brussels,   Email: cev@cev.be
Belgium   Website: http://www.cev.be