The Role of Intermediary Organisations as an Essential Element of the Volunteering Infrastructure

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Summary
This paper examines the crucial role of intermediary organisations – commonly referred to as volunteer centres – as integral components of the volunteering infrastructure across Europe. Drawing on insights from Germany, Portugal, Slovakia, and Sweden, it examines how these organisations support, promote, and develop volunteering at local, regional, and national levels. The study highlights how volunteer centres have evolved from basic volunteer matching services into dynamic entities engaged in policy advocacy, community development, digital innovation, and education. Despite differences, common trends include the shift toward capacity building, inclusive and flexible forms of volunteering, digital engagement, and strengthened roles in crisis response and democratic renewal. The authors argue that volunteer centres are not only facilitators of volunteering but also strategic actors in promoting social inclusion, civic participation, and community resilience. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening the role of volunteer centres. The analysis is grounded in expert knowledge, literature review, and collaborative reflection by co-authors with extensive experience in volunteering infrastructure development.

Keywords: Volunteering, Volunteer Centre, Intermediary Organisation, European, Trend

1. Introduction

Volunteering is a formidable force and a crucial component of the social fabric. Globally, it remains a significant driver in shaping and propelling development. Volunteering is pivotal for civil society, nurturing social inclusion, active citizenship, and community empowerment (United Nations Volunteers 2021). The term 'volunteering' is broad, encompassing an extensive range of organised and unorganised activities across diverse contexts and cultures for the general public,

"including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor" (United Nations Volunteers 2021: 16). Enabling individuals and organisations to engage in volunteer activities, ensuring that volunteering opportunities are accessible to all people, and harnessing the potential of volunteering for all involved stakeholders requires a broad range of support systems, networks, and resources, collectively known as volunteering infrastructure.

Volunteering infrastructure comprises various interconnected elements that create an ecosystem of support for volunteering. These elements encompass organisations, networks, resources, and systems facilitating volunteering engagement (Grubb 2021). Grandi/Lough/Bannister (2019) mention three key elements to operationalise the definition of volunteering infrastructure:

1. The *enabling environment* encompasses policies, laws, and other legal instruments that define, regulate, protect, and/or incentivise volunteering.
2. *Support structures* refer to organisations and networks that directly assist volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. They also include networks and coordinating bodies such as volunteer centres, umbrella organisations, and related networks.
3. *Implementation capacities* encompass crucial resources that enable and sustain volunteering, such as funding mechanisms, institutionalised channels of communication for consulting policymakers, mechanisms for data collection and knowledge sharing to document the scale and impact of volunteering, and established good practice standards.

The nature and scope of volunteering infrastructure vary considerably across countries and regions based on historical, cultural, and political factors. As Grandi/Lough/Bannister (2019) state, while volunteering infrastructure exhibits some similarities globally, it has also developed differently to accommodate divergent needs, demands, expectations, and contexts. Research has shown that a well-developed volunteering infrastructure is key to promoting and sustaining volunteering (Howard/Burns 2015). These support systems help volunteers find suitable opportunities and develop the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute effectively (Rutherford et al. 2019). Additionally, they play a crucial role in advocating for the recognition and value of volunteering, thereby enhancing its societal impact. As stated in the publication Volunteering Infrastructure in Europe, first published by the European Volunteer Centre (CEV) in 2012, and regularly updated since then, the question of the infrastructure supporting volunteering is often overlooked, since it is usually 'behind the scenes' and not immediately visible to individual volunteers or the beneficiaries of volunteering efforts. However, it is crucial for

the long-term sustainability of volunteering, for maintaining high standards, and for attracting and retaining volunteers.

The essential component of volunteer infrastructure is intermediary organisations, which play a vital role in supporting and promoting volunteering. Contemporary volunteer action is likely involved in relevant re-intermediation processes. Intermediary organisations are crucial in bridging the gap between individual volunteers, grassroots initiatives, and larger societal structures (Guidi 2021). In this study, the term 'intermediary organisation' is applied to various names used in different countries that not only engage and retain volunteers, like any other volunteer-involving organisation, but also "promote and support volunteering for any organisation that needs volunteers, at least in theory, and not for their use" (van de Bos 2014: 69). Intermediary organisations in volunteering can have different names in particular countries. Mostly, the terms used are 'volunteer centre', 'agency for voluntary/volunteer service', 'volunteer bank', 'volunteer bureau', 'voluntary action centre', 'voluntary/volunteering support centre', 'voluntary/volunteering network centre', 'volunteer agency', 'voluntary service centre', 'volunteer platform' and others. In this paper, we use the terms 'volunteer centre' or 'intermediary organisation'.

2. Definition and functions of volunteer centres

Several publications map the history and state of volunteer centres, primarily in particular countries: Ellis (1989) in the USA, Osborne (1999) in the UK, Palma/Paganin (2002) in Italy; Ebert et al. (2002) in Germany, Brozmanová Gregorová et al. (2012) in Slovakia, Lorentzen/Henriksen (2014) in Norway and Denmark, and van de Bos (2014) in several countries.

Volunteer centres were a new organisational form that emerged in the United States in the early 1930s. In the following period, the quantity and quality developed under social circumstances. Their activities responded to social demands and fulfilled various tasks. The mission of volunteer centres has always been to contribute to the development of democracy and civic participation in improving the quality of life (Ellis 1989). In Western Europe, since the 1970s governments and nonprofit organisations in many countries have considered developing volunteering policies a necessity, particularly concerning recruitment. The establishment of volunteer centres is a vital component of this process (van de Bos 2014). In post-communist countries, the process of developing volunteer centres began as part of rebuilding the civil society space after the 1990s.

Ellis (1989: x) defines a volunteer centre as a:

- Conceptual entity: an expression of a community-wide vision of volunteerism that is inclusive of diverse people and causes.

- Physical space: where various stakeholder groups can convene in a spirit of mutual concern for supporting volunteers.
- Focal point for coordinating and elevating the visibility of volunteer efforts.

Frič/Pospíšilová (2010) view a volunteer centre as an entity that operates as a mediator between volunteers and organisations, connecting the supply and demand for volunteers. According to Hustinx/Lammertyn (2003), volunteer centres are volunteer agencies that purposefully search for the optimal match between the needs of volunteers and the activities offered by the organisation. As van de Bos (2014) notes, the original purpose of establishing volunteer centres was to assist organisations in addressing their volunteer shortages. Over time, this objective expanded to include initiatives that promote and encourage volunteering, increasing the benefits of the diverse stakeholders invested in volunteer involvement.

Volunteer centres operate on various levels: globally, through the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE), whose history dates back to the 1970s, currently serving as the connective tissue to a global network of volunteer leaders, nonprofit organisations, businesses, and national leadership organisations that share a belief in the power of volunteering with members in more than 100 countries all over the world (International Association for Volunteer Effort 2025); at the European level, through the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) (until July 1, 2020 known as the European Volunteer Centre), which was established in 1992 and is a European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion of and support to volunteers and volunteering in Europe (Centre for European Volunteering 2025); and at the national level, through dozens of national volunteer centres, many of which are members of IAVE and/or CEV as well as locally through a network of numerous volunteer centres across regions and communities.

Volunteer centres currently fulfil several functions, and the nature of the activities that underpin these functions as well as the presence of individual functions can vary considerably from country to country and even within particular organisations. Van de Bos/Meijs (2008) describe volunteer centres as organisations that promote, stimulate, and develop volunteering, often at the local level, through the following means:

- Volunteer support: connecting individuals who want to volunteer with organisations that need volunteer effort.
- Management support: consulting with and supporting volunteer-involving organisations to enhance the attractiveness and appeal of their activities to prospective volunteers.
- Community support: facilitating conditions and supporting initiatives that enhance volunteer effort and citizen involvement in the community.

Penberthy/Forster (2004) listed the following six core functions of volunteer centres: brokerage, marketing volunteering, good practice development, developing volunteering opportunities, policy response, and campaigning and strategic development of volunteering. Later, van de Bos (2014) redefined these main functions to present a comprehensive and current summary of the services, tasks, and functions of intermediary organisations.

Intermediary organisations occupy a meso-level position between macro-level (governments, international bodies) and micro-level (individual volunteers). They ensure the volunteering ecosystem operates smoothly by aligning policies, resources, and personal participation with societal needs. The changing face of volunteering is reflected in the work of several authors (Brudney/Gazley 2006; Hustinx/Lammertyn 2003; Koolen-Maas et al. 2023; Thibault 2020), and so is the role of volunteer centres in the volunteering ecosystem at all levels: volunteer support, management support, and community support. In the following sections, we provide examples from four countries in the European community to illustrate different developments of intermediary organisations, approaches, and adaptations to these changes.

3. Methods

For the study, we selected countries from different parts of Europe where volunteer centres are anchored in the various volunteer traditions and movements. Our aim was not to provide an exhaustive analysis but rather to use the examples of these countries to identify different models of the emergence and functioning of volunteer centres and their responses to ongoing transformations in volunteer engagement and global trends. The text is the result of the joint work of the authors, who met in three co-creation sessions. At the first meeting, they defined the study's purpose and clarified the production process. After elaborating on the initial versions of the country studies, the authors convened a second joint meeting to discuss the current status and trends of each country as well as their similarities and differences. After the first meeting, the country studies were revised. Then, the co-authors met for a follow-up meeting to explore trends across Europe and formulate collaborative suggestions for policy and practice. The authors of the country reports and studies each have more than twenty years of experience supporting the development of volunteering infrastructure and volunteer centres in their respective countries and are familiar with both policies and trends in volunteering. They have developed the analysis and reflection based on their expert knowledge and a literature review.

4. Volunteer centres in four different countries

4.1 Germany

Volunteer-involving organisations understand themselves as infrastructure facilities for promoting volunteering. The most crucial legal form is the association, which is easy and inexpensive to establish and manage (Karnick/Simonson/Hagen 2022). In Germany, large welfare organisations in the social sector, such as the Red Cross, Caritas, and Diakonia, play a significant role (Freise 2024).

Germany has a federal structure, meaning responsibilities are shared between the federal government, the states ('Länder') and local authorities. Since the 1990s, local organisations have developed at the municipal level to promote volunteering, with some targeting different groups but performing similar tasks. These local organisations provide advice, training, and support to local actors, as well as coordination and networking, to encourage participation and promote volunteer involvement. They also identify new needs and organisational development, develop volunteering programmes, and encourage volunteering. (Jakob/Röbke 2010). Recently, promoting democracy and crisis resilience has also been emphasised (Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement 2024).

At the municipal level, the most important organisations for promoting volunteering are volunteer centres, mutual-help contact centres, senior citizens' offices, community foundations, mother-and-family centres, and multi-generational centres. "In general, volunteer centres differ from other volunteer support infrastructures in that they offer a broad range of services to promote civic engagement, promote volunteering in all population groups (regardless of age and social background), are active in all areas of civic engagement, and work neutrally – not supporting special organising institutions" (Krell 2012: 80). Volunteer centres, in particular, are well researched in Germany, thanks to the research work carried out regularly over the past 20 years by Speck and Backhaus-Maul (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2002; Speck/Backhaus-Maul/Friedrich/Krohn 2012; Speck/Backhaus-Maul/Krohn 2021).

There are currently more than 400 volunteer agencies in Germany. In recent years, the number of local authorities has increased, but almost two-thirds of volunteer centres are still run by nongovernmental organisations. Most volunteer centres view themselves as local actors, collaborating with local authorities to foster engagement and promote local networking. Digitalisation, integration of migrants, strengthening democracy, inclusion, and climate protection are new issues for the future (Speck/Backhaus-Maul/Krohn 2021).

At the state level, there are civic engagement networks in each of the individual federal states, as well as state associations of the local organisations mentioned

above. At the federal level, the Federal Network for Civic Engagement ('Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement'), founded in 2002, is the leading player (Klein 2024). Since 2020, the state organisation, the German Foundation for Civic Engagement and Volunteering ('Deutsche Stiftung für Engagement und Ehrenamt'), has been added as a well-funded actor (Holze/Peranic 2024). For many years, local infrastructure organisations have collaborated to form national umbrella organisations that work together in the Network for the Promotion of Volunteering and publish joint positions.

4.2 Portugal

The importance of formal and qualified volunteering has been growing in Portugal. The European Year of Volunteering in 2011 helped to shape national policies that structured and enhanced the sector. These European policies are reflected in Portugal through support for local projects and strengthening international volunteering networks, facilitating access to funding and training opportunities for volunteers and organisations.

In Portugal, volunteer intermediary organisations play a crucial role in promoting and coordinating volunteer activities at national, regional, and local levels. These entities facilitate the connection between volunteers and organisations needing support, ensuring an effective response to community needs. One example is the Local Volunteer Banks created on the recommendation of the National Commission for the International Year of Volunteers (2001), which have been a reality since 2002. In 2023, there were 183 active Local Volunteer Banks, and their role was crucial in consolidating and expanding volunteering.

The National Council for the Promotion of Volunteering (NCPV) was created in 1999 by Decree-Law 389/99 to promote and develop volunteering in Portugal. This body operated under the authority of the Ministry of Labour and Solidarity and included representatives from various ministries, regional governments, and CSOs. The primary responsibilities of this body were to issue the Volunteer ID Card, promote initiatives on the value of volunteering, provide technical support to organisations promoting volunteering, and monitor the implementation of legislation related to volunteering in Portugal. The NCPV was abolished in 2017, and its responsibilities were transferred to CASES by Decree-Law 39/2017. CASES maintains the role of NCPV and plays a central role in promoting and developing volunteering in Portugal. It manages the Portugal Voluntário platform, which facilitates contact between volunteers and organisations, and coordinates the Local Volunteer Banks, which promote, organise and deepen volunteering at a local level. Although CASES is the main governmental body responsible for volunteering, the Portuguese Volunteer Confederation (CPV) is the central actor in civil society, playing a key role in promoting and supporting volunteering in Portugal. CPV is

the main representative body of volunteers and volunteering organisations in Portugal, contributing to uphold their rights and interests. CPV also engages in advocacy efforts to influence public policies that affect volunteering, bridging the gap between civil society and public institutions and runs the Portuguese Volunteering Capital Competition focused on facilitating volunteer support at the local level.

4.3 Slovakia

In Slovakia, a new chapter on the development of volunteering was written after 1989. Several projects since the 1990s have supported the establishment and operation of volunteer centres.

The first volunteer centre in Slovakia was established in 1998 as the National Volunteer Centre under the leadership of the Slovak Academic and Information Agency – Service Centre for the Third Sector (SAIA – SCTS). Under its branches, it has created a network of volunteer centres throughout Slovakia. However, the SAIA – SCTS Volunteer Centre project ended in September 2002, after an unsuccessful search for financial resources to continue its operation despite the public recognition these activities had gained (Brozmanová Gregorová et al. 2012).

The oldest volunteer centre in Slovakia is the Centre for Volunteering in Banská Bystrica, established in 2000. Currently, there are eight regional volunteer centres in Slovakia, except one, all of which are associated with the Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organisations (PDCO). PDCO was established in 2011 as a resource centre for volunteering, and later it became a national volunteer centre. Its primary purpose is to support the creation of an enabling environment for volunteering development. PDCO is providing a national database of volunteering opportunities in collaboration with regional centres, conducting national volunteer awards, participating in the development of policies and strategies for volunteering, conducting research on volunteering, offering volunteer management training, and engaging in activities to promote volunteering and building the capacities of volunteer centres and volunteer-involving organisations.

For the first time, the concept of volunteer centres and the need for their support as intermediary organisations was officially introduced in Slovakia through the Programme for the Development of Volunteering and Volunteer Centres, adopted by a government resolution in 2013. This document highlights the importance of supporting volunteer centres as a vital component of the volunteering infrastructure and underscores the need for a financial mechanism to assist them.

Volunteer centres in Slovakia were established primarily by individuals and members of other nongovernmental organisations who responded to a social need in the region. The establishment of the centres in some areas was also significantly supported by the PDCO. In 2021, the volunteer centres, under the leadership of the

PDCO, developed the Quality Standards for Volunteer Centres, which define three levels of functioning of the volunteer centres and the main functions that organisations with the status of a volunteer centre should fulfil. The volunteer centres, in cooperation with PDCO, are also involved in several joint projects in the field of volunteering, bringing innovation into this area, which is also based on intensive international collaboration.

Public policy in the field of volunteering is shaped from below. The initiative in this area has been taken in recent years by PDCO, which, in cooperation with the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development, has successfully implemented several changes concerning the development of volunteering infrastructure.

4.4 Sweden

Intermediary organisations such as volunteer centres have traditionally played a peripheral role in Swedish volunteering. Instead, the central volunteer infrastructure has been the popular movements such as the labour, temperance, free church, and sports movements. Each of these movements consists of numerous associations with overlapping membership bases, through which the vast majority of volunteering in Sweden is carried out. These democratically governed associations have local, regional, and national branches, each run by a voluntary board of directors. This system (required for public funding and legitimacy), as well as a sense of duty to serve the movement, functions as an infrastructure of volunteer involvement, with the members as a recruitment base and a wide range of positions and tasks open for these members (Henriksen/Strømsnes/Svedberg 2019). In addition, state-funded umbrella organisations, such as the study associations (Åberg 2013; Harding 2012, 2013) and the Swedish Sports Confederation (Fahlén/Stenling 2016), support volunteering involvement through capacity building for the respective movements and their associations.

Although this traditional member and movement-based infrastructure remains a predominant mechanism for supporting volunteering in Sweden, its dominance is no longer as absolute as it was in the 1900s (Hvenmark 2008; Robertsson 2021), reflecting a shift from collective to individualised forms of volunteering that has for a long time been observed in international research (Hustinx/Lammertyn 2003). Fewer people are affiliated with popular movements, so they are unsure which associations to approach when they want to volunteer. They often prefer more flexible and immediate forms of volunteering (Henriksen/Strømsnes/Svedberg 2019).

This development has given rise to new volunteering infrastructure and intermediary organisations. For example, during the 1990s, many municipalities and associations established volunteer centres that connected volunteers with beneficiaries,

such as the elderly and people with disabilities (Wijkström 2017; Leonard/Johansson 2008). The National Board of Health and Welfare 2007 survey showed 69 volunteer centres in Sweden. Just under half were run by municipalities, while the rest were run by nongovernmental associations or other actors, with approximately 2,000 active volunteers (Socialstyrelsen, 2007). This survey has not been followed up, so we do not know how many volunteer centres exist today, or how many volunteers they coordinate. However, the Swedish Federation of Volunteer Centres, founded in 2012, has 27 members, operating at the local level and run mainly by nongovernmental associations. Ideally, each volunteer centre has an employed coordinator responsible for recruiting, placing, training, and nurturing volunteers, as well as acknowledging their efforts (Sveriges Frivilligcentraler 2025).

Since 2002, Sweden has also had a nationwide digital matching service connecting volunteers with volunteer-involving organisations, run by the association The Volunteer Bureau ('Volontärbyrån') (Essen 2019). In 2023, 196 new associations were registered on the website. Yearly, around 2,500 assignments (both short-term and long-term) are published. Furthermore, 7,312 people from 255 municipalities used the service to find assignments, ending in 11,779 expressions of interest. In addition to matchmaking, Volontärbyrån also engages in capacity building for associations, providing 79 courses, workshops, and lectures during the same year (Volontärbyrån 2025). Many associations, including those from traditional popular movements, utilise this infrastructure. However, a relatively large portion of the registered associations work within the area of social welfare, which, during most of the 1900s, has been seen as the state's responsibility and, therefore, not a priority for popular movements or a task for volunteers. Notably, Volontärbyrån is part of the Forum for Voluntary Social Work. This umbrella organisation supports and represents member associations in the field (Johansson/Johansson 2012) and is the only Swedish member of the CEV.

In conclusion, volunteering in Sweden is supported by two parallel infrastructures: the traditional infrastructure based on loyal membership in a popular movement, and the new infrastructure based on intermediary organisations such as local volunteer centres and the nationwide digital matchmaking service. Although these organisations help many volunteers to find volunteer placements, most volunteers and associations seem to manage without them, considering that more than four million Swedes volunteer and 260,000 non-profit associations need volunteers (Henriksen/Strømsnes/Svedberg 2019). The two infrastructures should also not be viewed as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary and interacting in the sector's development within a changing society (Wijkström/Zimmer 2011; Wijkström 2007).

5. Emerging trends in volunteer centres in Europe

Although volunteer centres, as a type of intermediary organisation, are a marginal phenomenon in some countries, such as Sweden – especially compared to other kinds of volunteer infrastructure organisations and movements – in others, they are essential stakeholders in the development of volunteering at the local, regional, and national levels. Volunteer centres have undergone quantitative and qualitative changes in European countries in recent years, as documented in the studies presented and reflected in the survey by Grandi/Lough/Bannister (2019). As entities, they are part of social structures shaped by economic, political, social, and cultural changes. These changes subsequently have an impact on the form and nature of volunteering. If volunteer centres want to respond to these trends and fulfil their mission, they must inevitably change their functions or the way they operate. Research in the field of volunteering has long pointed to the changing nature of volunteering at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Hustinx/Lammertyn 2003; Inglehart 2003; Haski-Leventhal/ Meijs/Hustinx 2010; Dunn/Chambers/Hyde 2016; Henriksen/Strømsnes/Svedberg 2018; Grandi/Lough/Bannister 2019; Rochester 2021; Cnaan et al. 2022; Heley/Yarker/Jones 2022). In the next section, we analyse how volunteer centres, as a key element of the volunteering infrastructure, are responding or should respond to some of these trends.

5.1 From matching to development agencies

Intermediary organisations have been established in different contexts in the countries analysed. Still, it is possible to identify common tendencies in their later development. At their emergence, informal or unorganised volunteer activities were more typical of the countries analysed. In the context of organisations, people's engagement was based more on a membership approach and a traditional style of engagement (Hustinx/ Lammertyn 2003). The emergence of volunteer centres responded to the need to support a managed, organised, or formal kind of volunteering, particularly in welfare service organisations, and later in other types, and people who sought volunteering opportunities or were interested in volunteering. National surveys in many European countries have shown that many people are interested in volunteering but are unsure about where to go or whom to contact (Brozmanová Gregorová et al. 2012; Leister/Opinion 2024; Simonson et al. 2021). That was the point at which the volunteer centres movement started. The potential of people willing to volunteer has always been a significant cause for volunteer centres to promote their work.

As the volunteering policy at the European and national levels evolved, so did the role of intermediary organisations and their functions in supporting volunteering, in the context of changing patterns of volunteering. In many countries, volunteer centres have started to focus on capacity building, advocacy, policy-making and

community development. Thanks to the activities of volunteer centres in developing volunteering policy, the role of national, regional, and local authorities has evolved in supporting volunteering. A few years ago, no volunteer policy existed in many European countries, but thanks to intermediary organisations, it began to become part of public policy on various levels. Over the past two decades, legislation and national policies specific to volunteering have, on average, expanded and consolidated globally (Grandi/Lough/ Bannister 2019). Volunteer centres are essential in promoting volunteering and supporting volunteer management, which has become an integral part of their work, emphasising their role in supporting volunteer-involving organisations and fostering innovation. Their support focuses on managing the shift from duty-based or membership volunteering towards more individualised motivations. It requires organisations engaging volunteers to adapt their strategies and balance adapting to volunteers' changing needs while focusing on community impact and organisational mission. As reflected by Koolen-Maas et al. (2023), by viewing volunteering as a human-made, renewable resource that can be cultivated and replenished, and offering different typologies of this resource, we can move beyond the idea of volunteering as a uniform resource. Volunteer centres should focus on creating a healthy, sustainable volunteer environment comprising multiple volunteer resources, stakeholders, and institutional arrangements to ensure the vigorous growth of all volunteer resources.

5.2 Volunteer centres as drivers of inclusive and flexible volunteer opportunities

The 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report concluded that while volunteering offers diverse pathways to civic participation, access remains unequal (UNV 2021). According to Enjolras (2021), a more equal distribution of resources increases individual capabilities to volunteer. Inclusive volunteering involves creating and adapting to an environment where people with different disadvantages can work alongside those without disadvantages to develop their community (Valková/ Koňasová/Marková 2016). Kearney (2003) points out that volunteering offers tangible benefits for people facing social exclusion, including access to social relationships, opportunities for empowerment, gaining and developing skills, for mental wellbeing, and the satisfaction of making a difference to others or society. Volunteering also allows people who are often invisible in society to influence how others perceive them. Meanwhile, inclusive volunteering can also be seen as a way to recruit more volunteers, especially from groups that are currently underrepresented in volunteering.

At the same time, the pandemic has drawn attention to new trends in volunteering, which are gaining popularity among young people and have escalated during COVID-19 (Dunn/Chambers/Hyde 2016). These include 'episodic' volunteering

(Cnaan et al. 2022) and micro-volunteering (Heley/Yarker/Jones 2022), which have been lauded for their potential to better incorporate individuals with limited time and mobility into the volunteer landscape. The last 20 years have also shown the rise of new parties to organise and host episodic volunteering. Haski-Leventhal/Meijs/Hustinx (2010) presented the third-party model in volunteering, where events are supported by new volunteer-involving organisations, such as companies (corporate volunteering), educational institutions (community service or service-learning), and social benefit organisations (volunteering for welfare benefits).

The changing nature of volunteering engagements, however, transforms the relations within and between participants and beneficiaries. This has implications for both organisations that rely on volunteer input and for those who receive this voluntary activity. Volunteer-involving organisations need to be more flexible in meeting the diverse demands of potential volunteers. Volunteer centres should promote and support volunteer-involving organisations in adapting to these changes and fostering flexibility by connecting people from different backgrounds to build more resilient communities.

5.3 Service-learning and the role of volunteer centres

One of the tasks of the volunteer centres is to promote quality volunteering and educate children and youth about it. Thus, they need to cooperate closely with formal education institutions such as schools, which are not only knowledge institutions but also key actors in preserving democratic values, fostering critical thinking, and promoting solidarity. Perpetuating democratic life in Europe and enhancing democratic competences are high priorities for the European Commission, posing a significant challenge for education institutions (Council of Europe 2018). Additionally, the UNESCO report "Reimagining our futures together" highlights the importance of solidarity and democratic values in educating future active and responsible citizens (International Commission on the Futures of Education 2021). However, ensuring that students develop the competencies for democratic culture requires more than traditional classroom teaching – it demands active, experiential learning approaches that connect academic knowledge with real-world societal challenges. Research studies demonstrate the potential of service-learning in developing democratic competencies in secondary education (Brozmanová Gregorová et al. 2024), and civic outcomes of service-learning are well-documented globally. From the perspective of volunteer centres, service-learning can be seen not only as an innovative method of teaching and learning but also as a tool for educating children and youth to be active citizens of society. For volunteer centres, this can be a way to attract more young people to volunteer and bring a philosophy of volunteerism into the formal education system.

5.4 Volunteer centres in digital spaces

The rise of digital platforms presents both additional complexity and opportunities (Ackermann/Manatschal 2018). The potential of online modes of volunteer engagement has been the subject of considerable interest, investment, and critique within practitioner, academic, and policy circles over the past decade. Much of this discourse has centred on the capacity of virtual technologies to address many of those traditional barriers to volunteering and to expand the volunteer base. Virtual volunteering is also well-suited for people seeking flexibility, including those in remote locations and with mobility issues, as well as those unable to commit to rigid schedules due to work and family commitments (Heley/Yarker/Jones 2022; Grubb 2021).

Volunteer centres must now mediate between traditional face-to-face volunteering and new forms of online engagement (Kapsammer et al. 2017; Thomas et al. 2019). New skills and approaches are also required to manage volunteers effectively. This may include utilising digital tools for communication, coordination, and training, and ensuring that online volunteering opportunities are meaningful, inclusive, and impactful (Kapsammer et al. 2017). Supporting accountable digital empowerment in volunteering organisations is one of the key ways to increase the potential of volunteering. However, care must be taken to ensure that differences in access to digital tools and data don't lead to further inequalities in access to volunteering or volunteer support (Centre for European Volunteering 2019). The role of digital platforms in making volunteering more accessible is a potential future function for volunteer centres. Digitalisation can also be a solution to manage volunteer centres better, oversee volunteers, and facilitate connections between volunteers and opportunities.

5.5 Volunteer centres in crisis management

The spontaneous volunteers are the first ones on the scene of any crisis, so they are the most experienced people in the local area, but they have to be organised. However, it is essential to acknowledge that volunteer support should not substitute the need for skilled professionals in crises; volunteers should operate under proper supervision and guidance. Volunteer centres can play a significant role during crises, as central hubs for coordinating volunteer efforts and distributing resources. Volunteer centres often work closely with local authorities and emergency response teams during emergencies to identify the most pressing needs and mobilise volunteers accordingly. In disaster management, community response is essential to the extent that sometimes the absence of institutional resources forces the community to mobilise to cope with the effects of the disaster (Marenco-Escuderos et al. 2020). While volunteer centres have big potential in crisis management, they are not yet fully recognised or integrated into the crisis management

system in many European countries. The tasks of volunteer centres in crisis management involve recruiting, training, and deploying volunteers to provide immediate assistance, such as distributing food and water, providing first aid, and offering emotional support to affected individuals. Volunteer centres may also provide training for volunteer-involving organisations and support to volunteers, ensuring they are adequately prepared to assist in relief efforts. The potential role of volunteer centres also includes managing risks and emphasising the importance of quality standards in volunteer management to ensure a safe environment for both volunteers and recipients.

5.6 Volunteer centres as promoting democracy

In the face of growing challenges to democracy, including declining civic participation, social fragmentation, and the spread of misinformation, volunteer centres play an essential role in fostering a sense of community and democracy. They promote cooperation, participation and solidarity. Macro-structural indicators of democracy and horizontal social capital (social trust) are positively associated with volunteer rates (Enjolras 2021). Volunteer centres should not only focus on tasks but also encourage volunteers to think about the purpose of their engagement. Volunteer centres should promote democracy, and they can serve as a basic school of democracy. Through volunteer engagement, people learn how to discuss different interests, find common ground, and compromise on various interests.

5.7 Addressing loneliness and mental health by volunteering

Volunteer centres may serve as essential institutions in addressing the escalating issues of loneliness and mental health. Volunteer efforts can provide people with opportunities for social interaction, enhance mental well-being, and foster a sense of belonging. Volunteer centres can connect people with volunteer opportunities that align with their interests and skills. Furthermore, participation in volunteer work fosters the establishment of social networks and offers opportunities for companionship, which is essential for mental well-being and combating social isolation (Stukas et al. 2016). Volunteer centres may provide workshops and training courses that equip volunteers with the skills to offer assistance and encouragement to others, thereby promoting empathy and fostering supportive communities. Volunteer centres may collaborate with local mental health groups and healthcare providers to establish programs that specifically address the mental health requirements of volunteers and the people they assist. Volunteer centres are well positioned to significantly improve societal well-being and create more resilient, connected communities by recognising and utilising the therapeutic potential of volunteerism (Librett et al. 2005).

5.8 Volunteer centres as advocates for strategic volunteer policy

Recognition of volunteering and its importance is a political question. Volunteer centres can promote suitable volunteering strategies and volunteer public policy. Volunteer centres should actively advocate for policies that support and encourage local, regional, and national volunteering. Volunteer centres can work with government agencies, non-profit organisations, for-profit companies, academia, the media, and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive volunteer strategies that address societal challenges and promote civic engagement. Recent global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have brought into sharp focus the indispensable contributions of volunteers in bolstering societal resilience and providing critical support to vulnerable populations, thereby underscoring the need for robust and adaptable volunteer policies. These actions entail lobbying legislators, funding, educating the public about the benefits of volunteerism, and collaborating to create a volunteer-friendly legal and regulatory environment. In this effort, we can also see an essential element in the networking of volunteer centres, supporting the implementation of volunteer policies from the European to the local level, and vice versa.

We agree with Brudney/Meijs (2013) that by recognising the existence of a broader volunteer environment, the volunteer centres should advocate for the addition of a wider dimension to traditional volunteer management: volunteer-environment management, which refers to the collaborative implementation of policies for sustaining and strengthening, or rebuilding a healthy, thriving volunteer environment. The extent to which volunteering will be an answer to society's challenges (national, regional, global) depends on how much policy makers will recognise its importance, acknowledge its roots and potential among its residents, and build stimulating frameworks for its noble growth (Šimunković, 2022).

6. Conclusion

Across Europe, intermediary organisations are undergoing structural transformations, resulting in a renewed emphasis on the role of institutions within this landscape (Guidi 2021). Considering the evolving roles and emerging trends of European volunteer centres, several policy and practice recommendations can be proposed. First, governments should recognise the strategic importance of volunteer centres and institutionalise them within national and local policy frameworks to bolster civic engagement, crisis response, and social inclusion. Second, support is needed to develop inclusive and flexible volunteering models that cater to the diverse needs and motivations of underrepresented groups. Third, fostering partnerships between educational institutions and volunteer centres is essential to promote civic engagement among youth. Fourth, investing in digital infrastructure and competencies is necessary to enable meaningful and accessible online and

hybrid forms of volunteering. Fifth, integrating volunteer centres into formal crisis management systems should be prioritised to enhance community resilience and coordinate volunteer mobilisation. Finally, sustained support for advocacy, capacity building, and professionalisation within volunteer centres is critical. By implementing this recommendations in practice, volunteer centres can play a crucial role in cultivating inclusive, flexible, and digitally enabled volunteering environments that respond to evolving societal needs and individual motivations. Moreover, they can serve as hubs of democratic learning and civic participation, fostering solidarity, empowerment, and social cohesion. Consequently, they can be increasingly recognised as not only facilitators of volunteering but also vital contributors to broader societal resilience and democratic renewal.

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