

CEV Presidency 2009 - 2015

I remembered how I joined the first CEV Conference in 2003 in London. I knew nearly nobody, thrown into a group of interesting persons, with different perspectives, ideas and knowledge on volunteering. Maybe you don't believe it, but I was rather shy, listened carefully, was impressed and felt not that confident to talk or give any opinion. But the London experience gave me taste for more. In a former job I already have had the opportunity to connect on a European level, in a slightly different context of Trade Union matters.

I am very attached to the idea that working together at a European level is worthwhile and important. Especially in the 'social field' or rather in stressing on social connections, networks and cohesion that has to be built between people. There is no doubt that volunteering bridges and binds people as well as organisations. In a European Union that puts forward ideas as 'employability, competition and concurrence' it is needed to counterbalance a too narrow economical view on development with a social dimension. The engagement of over 100 millions volunteers within the European Union has an important added value of which we are not always aware of.

It is striking that, when authorities cut spendings, mostly the 'social domains' are affected; included the volunteering. I was proud that during my Presidency CEV came out with a clear point of view on volunteering in a period of economic crises, in which we affirmed that volunteering has its own dynamic, is needed to include people, to ensure that they are integrated into society and are part of a broader network of people collaborating in a constructive way and that volunteering is not 'the' solution nor to resolve unemployment nor to motivate decreases in public spending for people in a need. Sometimes politicians-everywhere in Europe- seem to like volunteering, not for the force itself of the engagement, the dedication of people, the added value, but as an easy and cheap alternative to tackle challenges and problems which are very hard to solve.

CEV always stated that though volunteering is 'priceless', it is not cost free. A society that respects itself, has to be aware of the fact that investment in volunteering is necessary. This is exactly one of the things which I liked particularly in CEV. since its origin it is striving for more public attention for volunteering, is making efforts to ensure that the European Institutions do take volunteering serious, what can be proved by setting up a more coordinated approach to support volunteering at EU level.

So, you can feel that I was really convinced in the work of CEV, endorsing its aims and the way that CEV tries to realise its' aims: by advocacy, networking, by bringing the membership together to exchange good practices, ideas and suggestions, to 'use' the network for policywork. We saw more than once that due to the efforts of our members in the National States, things were able to be pushed at the European level, because a lot of MEP's endorsed our suggestion, or because we were able to voice volunteering within the EESC, at working groups installed by the European Commission and so on. The acting together rewards itself.

The combination of believing that you are acting for a good cause, as volunteering is for sure, with the 'suspense' of political action brings, always attracted me a lot. When CEV prepared for Presidential elections in 2009, I did hesitate a bit. My own organisation is quiet small. The workload if I would be candidate for the CEV Presidency and then also possibly been elected, would increase the workload a lot. Was it better not to do it? I do believe that the 'political beast' in me triggered me to persuade my own BoD to be endorsed to be candidate.

I was rather nervous when I travelled back in 2009 to the GA of Malmö, as not sure if I would get the support of the CEV Membership. There was another candidate, so enough excitement. It was cold in Malmö. After a while the elections took place and the election committee draw back to a separate room to count the votes. It seemed to take ages before they returned. The announcement that I was elected as President a bit later was great and I really felt myself as a happy kid, or a teenager for the first time badly in love.

The work started then. You have to try to motivate a Board of Directors, all dedicated people but also very busy people, to invest enough time for the European level. You have to make sure that the members of CEV do feel that their membership at CEV is needed and worthwhile. It is not easy, as different countries have different needs, different opinions of what has to be dealt with first. Then we always faced (and still face) that the marvelous CEV-staff is actually too small to be able to fulfill all possible requests of the members. I was always impressed on the strong Activity Reports, the hard work done by the Staff members.

I keep nice memories to the period I was CEV President. Around that time CEV started being involved into the whole Volunteering Measurement idea; I recall the fierce discussions we had in Ljubljana, as a lot of people doubted the relevance of volunteering measurement and the possible consequence that it might lead to a 'instrumentalisation' of volunteering, or a solely economical approach. I had my doubts as well. I confirm. But during the process the advantages of measuring became more clear.

Another milestone during my Presidency was the EYV2011, which brought me all around Europe and gave me the opportunity to see volunteering in Romania, Germany, Italy, Estonia, Greece,... I enjoyed the talks with so many people, and I remember a conference in Budapest. A young Hungarian volunteer walked in my direction asked to be with him on the picture and talked about his engagement. It was really a more than nice experience.

Off course, the EYV2011 was more than traveling around or meeting people. I was very proud of the fact that CEV took the lead to process with different European stakeholders within the EYV2011 Alliance and published before the closure of the year the PAVE (Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe) document. PAVE contains recommendations in different areas of volunteering (quality, legislation,...) and can be considered as a basic publication for ongoing action towards the EU institutions and National Governments.

However I am a bit disappointed about the real legacy of the EYV2011. We asked for instance, for a Focal Point at the EC. It has not been realized and we see today that volunteering remains a divided competence, with as consequence that it is difficult to move forward. I also see, not only at EU level, but also at the level of different countries and/or regions again more stress on volunteering as a means to overcome public spending, or as a means to increase employability. Our CEV conference in Turin was dedicated to the question if we are facing (within Social Services) an increase of the so-called 'instrumentalisation' of the volunteer sector.

If volunteering needs only to be useful, a lot of essential characteristics will be jeopardized. Volunteering has to be an act of an individual, an engagement and commitment that he or she is into because he or she is willing to do so and has the free will and independence to choose whether he or she likes to be engaged. I have more than the impression that this free choice is under pressure.

I do like the work of CEV stressing that volunteering is a way to develop skills and competencies and that people really can grow through volunteering. We will have to stress today and in the future on the fact that volunteering is a learning area, for young and old people, as well as for the vulnerable.

During my Presidency of CEV I have seen how many CEV members did connect with each other to set up projects to strengthen volunteering. I was really charmed by the project led by our Italian member SPES for older volunteers, giving them an opportunity to go and volunteer in one of the other countries involved in the project. I heard a Romanian woman witness on her experience in Croatia, an Italian man on what he did in Slovakia, and so on.

Volunteering has the ability to connect people to each other, and if we really want to develop common European values, you have to ensure that people can connect, can talk and collaborate together. Only by real activities and face-to-face communication, a feeling of EU belonging can be developed. I don't have to stress that volunteering can help us in exchanging and reaching this goal to make the EU an interesting project for Europeans to be part of.

A small frustration as CEV President is that things move slowly, especially in a multicultural setting, as it is not always easy to understand what the other says, or because you have not enough information on the context or situation of the other volunteer centre. The publication of the Volunteering Infrastructure made by CEV, helps us to understand how countries developed their supporting structures, but also what are challenges and possible weaknesses.

I saw during my mandates as CEV President, that, if faced with national challenges, countries are seduced to refer back to their own domestic reality, forgetting the EU-context. There was a time that we saw in CEV that some members dedicated less money in their European work, that it was harder to invest in the common European work. I do believe that this is not the right approach, as we can only move our own case forward through collaboration, common goals and a European approach.

I tried to invest in a good 'constitution' for CEV (the statutes, indeed), but also trying to attract people from different organisations from all corners of the EU to participate at the conferences and within the BoD. There is so much talent, I did not see (mostly) anything then professional people working at their best to contribute. We renewed the BoD at the last conference. We have changed the President. I believe that Cristina will be a good President. It brings new and fresh blood to the decision making structures of CEV.

I am very hopeful for the future of CEV. The volunteering is a blooming business, we can see that also more companies are interested in collaboration with the volunteer sector, there are so many hopeful initiatives expressing also interest of policymakers, and last but not least, people do still like to engage in volunteering.

The refugee crises that is taking place now within the EU seems to be complex, if you look at it with a 'political eye'. If you look at it from a perspective of a volunteer, nothing seems to be impossible: so many people are engaged to help refugees: rescue actions, medical support, food support, spontaneous and organised actions, initiatives from human rights movements, setting up language courses and so on. The involvement of volunteers, I have learned this at our last Conference in Brussels, is more than impressive.

That's one of the strengths' of volunteering: to walk the walk and not stick merely to the talk the talk. I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to serve CEV for two mandates as President.

Author

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