

### Voluntary Services in France, Challenges and Tendencies

First of all, it is important to clarify different terms: In English *volunteering* is unique word used for different activities. In France we have two words: *Bénévolat* and *Volontariat*. The notion of *volontariat* is relatively recent. *Bénévolat* is considered as a not paid activity, freely chosen which is generally organised within a non-profit institution. The better translation in English is *volunteerism*.

*Volontariat* that we can translate in English as *voluntary work* defines an activity with a formal commitment (a contract for a limited duration). The *volunteer* is not salaried but receives compensation. The different statuses of volunteering work are exceptional regarding the labor code. Finally the contract of volunteering work does not imply direct link of subordination.

*Volontariat* (Volunteering work) is in the border of labour market and volunteerism or charity activity (in the UK sense).

This specific position creates confusions. In the situation of bad rates of unemployment especially for young people, some politicians or responsible institutions consider volunteering work as a door or even an alternative to jobs, while volunteering organizations consider the role of personal and collective commitment as a pre requisite to enter in volunteering work.

### Different Voluntary Services in France

#### 1) *Animateur Volontaire*

The oldest voluntary activity in the sense of volunteering work is the activities of social and cultural animation in the summer camps or in what we call *centres de vacances, centres de loisirs, accueil de loisirs*. *L'animateur* (organizer, facilitator, animator; different translations are possible.) is one person who commits herself or himself to act in a non-professional educational activity. His or her role is educational and is a kind of civil society commitment to participate freely to children or youth education. During years 1930 to 1980 it was a strong link between formal system of education and leisure and non-formal education. After 1980, the tendency was to professionalize the sector and numerous *animateurs* used this volunteering work as a springboard into the job. There is still an ambiguity in the sector between professional or volunteering activity. Employers sometimes use the status of these volunteers to respond to a real demand of jobs and of the market.

## **2) Volunteer International Service**

Volunteer International Service exists since the years 1950 / 1960. It was an alternative to the military service. Nowadays it is a free choice of around 3000 persons. The control of the activities are under the control of foreign affairs ministry. NGO's nonprofit are the organizers on the ground. The volunteers receive compensation per month that permits to have a quite decent life in the countries they live in. Social security as well as health services are financed. There are trainings and preparation to the mission as well as a returning debriefing to favor the "re-insertion" of the volunteers in "classical" activities.

## **3) Service Civique (Civic Service)**

Created in 2010 *le service civique* is a volunteering mission from 6 to 12 months in a non-profit, or an official organization (municipality, hospitals, social work organization, etc.). It has not to be a "normal" working position which could be occupied by one worker or employee. The activities occupied by the young volunteer (under 30) have to be of general and social interest. *Service civique* has a strong impact in the generation aged 18 to 30. It is open to all young people without or with different levels of studies. The government wants to generalize this opportunity to more young people.

### **Reality of Voluntary Services and Contradictions with Labour Market**

Associations and different civil society representing organizations give a strong value to the role of volunteering in two definitions that I mentioned in the beginning of the article. For different backgrounds some organizations understand the role of volunteering as a completely none paid activity and some others want to push the idea of volunteering work as a way to have a commitment in the society with recognition by a compensation of volunteer's essential role.

The problem of unemployment has an impact on the sense and the objectives of those different voluntary services. They appear as an alternative to employment.

The risk is that there is no training or accompanying measures to prepare young people to translate their commitment in a real social and useful action for them and for society.

The second risk is that these activities become a sort of compulsory way to be included in the society. Young people have a string impression of social insecurity because of these different ways before entering in society with social and professional autonomy.

The third risk is that associations, nonprofit organizations, as well as municipalities, use voluntary services as a subvention and an alternative to real jobs.

The tendencies of the sector are in my opinion not very positive. The labor market is not better today, and then the confusions between voluntary services and jobs are still there. For example there is a government project to transform service civique in a universal service for all boys and girls in France. It could be not so long, but for all one generation, using the

ancient model of military service. There are a lot of discussions in youth associations and education associations to have a position on that issue. The notion of universal and compulsory is very criticized by some organizations referring to the values of *education populaire* that means a free and deliberate choice in volunteering activities. The question is on the table of interministerial body (Army, education, youth and sports, etc.).

The idea of supporting and recognizing voluntary activities could be an opportunity for the government to reinforce the idea of general interest and to develop civic and civilian reflexes. But because of lack of financing and the lack of a real youth policy that idea is not effective.

In that dimension more cooperation between civil society organizations from different countries of European Union could push better projects. For example the negotiation and discussion for future European programs for the campaign starting in 2020 will start on late 2018. European coordination will be a strong positive element.

### **Author**

*David Lopez is the head of the International and European Relations in La Ligue de l'enseignement. Created in 1866, it is the oldest and strongest organization in France in the field of non-formal education. It is a confederation of 28 000 associations acting in all the fields of what is called in France "Education Populaire": sports, culture, leisure time, social work, youth work, international exchanges, organization of debates, struggle against discrimination. It is an organization linking social and educational action with social and political positions. La Ligue de l'enseignement is a key actor of civil society and civil dialogue in France. In Europe, the organization is present in different networks of civil society: SOLIDAR, Lifelong Learning Platform (David Lopez is an acting president), European Civic Forum, European Humanist Federation. David Lopez is also general secretary of CNAJEP (National committee of associations of popular education and youth organizations).*

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