

The social situation in the European Union

Gabrielle Clotuche

Director, Employment and Social Affairs DG

Thank you for your kind invitation to participate today, thus giving me the chance to present a recent Commission publication which, in a number of respects, concerns the subject of your conference.

Indeed, the Commission has adopted its first report, which it wishes to make an annual publication, entitled: "**The Social Situation in the European Union**". This report, available in three languages (EN, FR, DE), describes the general social situation in Europe on the basis of harmonised information which allows reliable and comparative analyses of tendencies in Member States. It will therefore contribute to the debate on the social dimension in today's Europe and in the future.

I should like to take the liberty, if I may, of presenting very briefly the content of the section entitled "Social Participation" which deals, among other things, with voluntary service, a subject that is at the heart of your discussions today.

A few brief observations:

Organised participation is relatively high in the European Union.

There is considerable activity in the voluntary sector.

The sector has developed considerably over the past 20 years.

Participation in society is a sign of social cohesion because it reflects the state of society's relations, the extent to which individuals agree to and are capable of taking part in society.

There is a dynamic relationship between participation in society, relations and commitment: social cohesion will be all the stronger if individuals invest their energies in a club, an organisation or an association, if they strengthen their ties with others and identify with others.

Making a commitment to voluntary work

There are significant gaps between Member States in terms of citizens' commitment to voluntary work. In general, the degree of participation in social or religious organisations which undertake charitable activities is relatively low at EU level as a whole (7.4% of those age 15 and over), although the Netherlands has a participation level six times higher than that of Greece. This gap reflects, to a certain extent, the diverging nature of participation between the North and the South and thus the absence of such organisations in the South. This aspect is dealt with more thoroughly in the section on voluntary service.

Percentage of persons active in voluntary organisations 1998

Source: Eurobarometer, 1998

How much time do people spend on these activities?

A majority of citizens (67.9%) spend less than 10 hours a month on such activities.

A minority (7% for the EU as a whole) spend more than 30 hours a week. In Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Austria, Portugal and the United Kingdom, the maximum time spent on this type of activity is above the average.

Who are volunteers? How can they be characterised?

There are more men than women who join clubs (41% as against 28%)

There is remarkable symmetry across age groups: 34% of 16-year-olds and 38% of 69-year-olds belong to a club.

In the 70-79 range, there is a slight decline (32%) but it is not until age 80 and over that there is a significant reduction (24%).

Economic activity has an influence on club membership: working people tend more than the jobless and other economically inactive persons to join clubs.

On average, retired persons tend to join clubs more than those not economically active.

Income is also an important indicator of social participation levels.

Those who live in households that have a hard time making ends meet tend to join clubs less than those without such difficulties (29% and 39%).

The lowest-income households have less of a tendency than the more affluent to join clubs (27% and 40%).

And education level and state of health also influence participation.

There is very little scientific data on the scope of voluntary activity in Member States but the findings we do have suggest that this form of participation is considerable and is increasing.

A survey of more than 20,000 persons revealed that one in four Europeans does unpaid work for various charitable causes and volunteer associations.

Volunteers are not representative of the population as a whole: more or less middle-aged, they tend to be better educated, more confident, more religious, less materialistic and to have certain morals and civic-mindedness. Research has shown that they also enjoy an appreciably higher level of psychological well-being than the population as a whole.

**Percentage of citizens taking part in different types of voluntary service,
EU-15, 1990**

Health	1.8
Social services	4.1
Youth movements	2.9
education, art, culture	3.8
local community action	1.5
third world, human rights	1.5
women's associations	1.4
environmental protection	1.5
defence of animal rights	1.0
sport and leisure	6.8
religious and church works	5.8
unions	2.0
political parties and movements	2.3
professional associations	1.9

The information available suggests that volunteering is more predominant in the North than in the South. It is more developed in Belgium, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and the United Kingdom and less developed in Spain and Portugal.

But why such a commitment and in what organisation?

A study conducted in the early 1990s looked at the findings of an average of 230 households in comparable areas of seven European countries, in both the North and the South, to determine the proportion and the characteristics of persons who are actively involved in their community or in voluntary organisations. The result was an average of three organisations per 1,000 inhabitants, suggesting that the total number of organisations in the present 15 Member States must be well beyond 1 million. But it is likely that at least 90% of these organisations are small and local.

The total sampling of 1,590 respondents was divided up in terms of their awareness and level of commitment to local associations and groups.

The sampling revealed 5% very active persons, 9% moderately active and 86% inactive.

Another study examined the extent to which "activism" is linked to the fact that the respondent is personally affected by the activity. Four interesting situations came to light:

42% of those surveyed were not very interested in local affairs, even when they affected their household, and they did nothing.

Another large group, 45%, were very concerned about local problems, which directly affected their household in one fourth of the cases, but they did very little.

A third group of 7% were concerned about local problems, frequently affected by them and reacted.

The last group, 5%, while not particularly affected, showed concern about local problems and were very active.

Lastly, and to conclude, I would add another element that offers insight into social participation tendencies. It comes from the analysis of public opinion on citizens' perceptions and expectations of the future of social protection in the context of the Eurobarometer survey conducted in 1992 and 1999.

The scope of voluntary work in Europe

Table 1 shows what the public in general thinks about different aspects of social protection and whether these aspects should be dealt with by local/national administrations, private enterprises or non-profit associations. In all Member States, the public sector is constantly mentioned in first place, followed by associations. It is only in the case of health services that the private sector moves ahead of the non-profit sector in public preferences (although it must be recognised that the distinction between "public service" and "voluntary sector" is not always clear for respondents).

Table 1: Public attitudes to responsibility for social protection (percentages)

	Public sector	Private sector	Non-profit associations	No opinion
Education	88	4	4	4
Child minding	66	10	13	11
Care for the elderly	72	7	14	6
Health services	86	6	4	4
Humanitarian aid	66	6	22	6
Aid for the less advantaged and socially excluded	76	4	15	5
Adult cultural/leisure activities	37	14	42	7
Children's cultural/leisure activities	40	11	42	7

Source: Eurobarometer 1998

Original: French text