

Conclusion

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## **The European Year of Older Persons**

**The International Year decreed by the UN** to raise awareness of the phenomenon we are experiencing: **the ageing of the population.**

International organisations wish to promote reflection, are appointing experts and hope to come up with solutions.

The "ageing of the population": hardly a dynamic term to describe an unbelievable opportunity in which everyone wants to participate: **a longer life.**

We are 60, 70, even 80 years old and we are here to live this day together.

Imagine the progress made in the last 100 years! How many of us would have been here today were this the year 1900, when life expectancy was around 40... if all went well. And, what's more, we are here in a European Parliament, after 50 years of peace in our Europe of 15.

If we are here today, it is to proclaim that we are not passive, that **we want to participate.**

We are aware that the society in which we live is changing. But is this really new in our human society? The speed of this change is probably the real revolution.

This is why it is time to discuss the subject with the other generations, but also with **policy-makers**, because we want to remain an active party, without discrimination, simply because we are here.

While we live with different needs that must be met, we also, without a doubt, have experience that can continue to be useful.

The UN recommends that we **stay active to age well**, which was the theme of today's work: Senior citizens and a commitment to volunteering – An active social life as a source of health.

Indeed, **staying active to age well** could also be a good slogan for the commitment to voluntary service!

And I might add that we should stay active to help more dependent persons remain active in turn and to help them break with isolation.

These ideas are in keeping with the recommendations of the WHO, which is concerned with health care throughout life; these same concerns are also emerging at the European Commission's **Research DG**, which is moving towards health policy in global terms, rather than from the standpoint of the major illnesses.

The quality of life must be part of living longer. Statistics can be so grim: they speak only of the length of life and of illnesses that kill us but that must be combated so that we can die a little older. The quality of this longer life seemingly gives rise to less concern. But Jacques Brel constantly reminds us that the clock hasn't stopped ticking for some!

The quality of life is above all the possibility of continuing to live in society, to be recognised in spite of the successive small handicaps that begin to accumulate. It is being able to make up for the deficiencies that prevent us from living daily life normally, for instance, housing adapted to avoid falls, the financial means to buy spectacles, hearing aids, teeth, a tele-alarm ... It is also having visitors, which brings us back to volunteers.

Throughout today's discussions, we have seen the diversity and the complexity of voluntary service. From the third world to commitments to social, economic, cultural and -why not- even sport activities...

I would like to stress two points:

**Family voluntary work**, which is not recognised but very demanding and which often falls upon women. Women live longer, what a privilege!

And I'd like to share an anecdote with you in this connection. In Greece, a very busy gentleman, on his way to visit his father, told me how surprising it was to see that a man in hospital is usually accompanied. His wife is there all day long, to look after him, feed him, help him. But a woman in hospital is older and often alone... That's women's luck!

**Voluntary work with responsibility.** Leaders of NGOs, of associations as varied as they are numerous, these volunteers sometimes get caught up in a vicious circle of responsibilities, including financial.

**Voluntary service that is clearly understood and mapped out is in no way an obstacle to the necessity of certain jobs being made professional; on the contrary, it provides support for such jobs as a factor of dynamism and creativity.**

Voluntary service is multiple, it is irreplaceable for detecting needs. Through its presence on the ground, it is very often innovative. The solutions it provides **creates jobs**. As evidence, one need only look at all the organisations, home help for example, that began as spontaneous volunteering. The neighbour helping her neighbour..., different hot-line counselling services, play grounds and even libraries... Countless jobs have been created in this way!

Voluntary service is for everyone, young and not so young, although not everyone has the possibility, notably financially, of volunteering.

So let's look at ways that could serve to encourage voluntary service:

To be effective, one first has to know what one is talking about. This is why we recommend that:

### **The European Commission:**

1. Conduct **a survey** to determine country by country:

- the profile of volunteers
- the number of associations using volunteers
- the number of volunteers, so as to evaluate their percentage
- the different forms of commitment
- the impact of voluntary work on employment and the economy.

2. Undertake a **study** from which conclusions might be drawn on the impact for volunteers of their active role and the impact for those assisted by volunteers on their health and thus on social security.

3. Work to secure **recognition of the value of voluntary service** by establishing rules for mutual commitment. We have already drafted a number of charters. An example is included in your documentation. Wouldn't this be a good time to make it official by improving and completing it?

4. Propose **recommendations** to the Member States for the elimination of obstacles to voluntary work, so that everyone can engage in voluntary service. The volunteer's expenses should be paid, which simply means that the costs that come out of a volunteer's pocket should be reimbursed. This means that associations must have the resources to do so. Such expenses must be taken into account in subsidies.

I should like to end with a few words by Léon Lemercier, President of the "Association du Volontariat" in the French Community of Belgium:

Volunteers have something to say

**They detect needs – they bring people out of their torpor – they track down injustice – they anticipate problems – they invent solutions – they upset traditions – they dare to speak of free acts.**