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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	The role of volunteers in European sport - <i>Policy debate</i>

Following consultation of the members of the Working Party on Sport, the Presidency has prepared the attached background document as the basis for the policy debate at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 13-14 May 2024.

The role of volunteers in European sport

Background document

In Europe, the sport sector is heavily reliant on voluntary work¹, from grassroots level to the highest level. Be it for the organisation of everyday sporting activities (through coaches in particular), or for the overall management and organisation of club and federation events, volunteers play a crucial role by:

- promoting participation through the organisation of sports events and competitions.
Volunteering fosters social inclusion, in particular for people who are socially isolated.
- providing logistical and human capital support to clubs and sports organisations.
- strengthening ties within the community and fostering social cohesion.
- promoting (European) sports values such as fair play, respect, solidarity and responsibility².
- supporting everyday sporting activities through coaching and refereeing.

¹ European Commission, Sennett, J., Le Gall, A., Kelly, G. et al., ‘Study on the European Sport Model – A report to the European Commission’, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, p. 46.

² Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the key features of a European Sport Model, 2021/C 501/01, OJ C 501/01, 13.12.2021, paragraph 24.

Whilst there is a consensus among stakeholders on the importance of sport, Europe nonetheless continues to face challenges regarding volunteering in sport³. The sport sector struggles to recruit and retain volunteers due to the lack of people interested in the role, the low numbers of applicants or in some specific cases the low numbers of applicants with the right skills and attributes⁴. The Eurobarometer special survey 525 on physical activity shows that 10% of Europeans engage in a volunteering activity in sport, with huge disparities among the Member States. The socio-demographic data also show that volunteering in sport is particularly unpopular among elderly people, women, working class and less educated people⁵.

In some Member States, the public authorities are concerned about a possible decline in the number of volunteers within sports clubs and organisations⁶, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. They have therefore taken measures to encourage volunteering.

³ European Commission, Sennett, J., Le Gall, A., Kelly, G. et al., ‘Study on the European Sport Model – A report to the European Commission’, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, pp.72-74.

⁴ ‘Sport volunteering in Europe: Realities, opportunities and challenges’ report (2023), V4V partnership, coordinated by the European Observatoire of Sport and Employment (EOSE), p. 19.

⁵ European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 525, ‘Sport and Physical Activity (2022)’, 2668 / SP525, September 2022, pp. 63-65.

⁶ European Commission, Sennett, J., Le Gall, A., Kelly, G. et al., ‘Study on the European Sport Model – A report to the European Commission’, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, pp. 72-74.

The Presidency has two angles of approach:

- Volunteers are vital for clubs and sports organisations in many ways. One of the most important aspects is the economic dimension of volunteering in sport. According to our national studies on the social return on investment in sport and bearing in mind that sport generates a positive return on investment⁷, the social value of a volunteer's contribution to sport comes right after the health benefits in importance⁸.

Volunteers contribute to the economic viability of their sports association by reducing the organisational costs. It is a win-win situation as it allows volunteers to develop new skills and at the same time creates a better social environment, which in turn leads to greater well-being in society.

- Regarding the importance of volunteers for the sport sector, it is essential to acknowledge and reward the commitment of volunteers in sport, among other things to guarantee their satisfaction and long-term engagement. This recognition can take several forms: a collective appreciation of the work done by volunteers, the creation of opportunities to enhance their professional and self-development skills, involving volunteers in the decision-making process of their sport organisation, and financial rewards, or even gifts, such as privileged access to sports events.

In order to boost volunteers' engagement in sport, there is a need to identify the obstacles within sports regulations at national and European level, as well as the administrative barriers to the promotion of commitment to an association.

⁷ OECD/WHO (2023), 'Step Up! Tackling the Burden of Insufficient Physical Activity in Europe', OECD Publishing, Paris, p.3.

⁸ Davies, L., Zintz, T., Ramchandani, G., Ricour, M., & De Bosscher (2023), V., 'Social return on investment of sport in the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles', iov Adepts, Sheffield Hallam University & VUB. Sheffield Hallam University.

Questions to the Member States for the policy debate (3 minutes per intervention)

- Through which measures do you encourage volunteering in the field of sport at local, regional, and national level, with a particular focus on those who tend to be less involved?
 - What are the current obstacles at national and European level that discourage volunteering in sport? How can they be removed to better involve volunteers? What can be done at European level to resolve this?
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Related European documents

- The White Paper on Sport (2007).
 - Council conclusions on the role of voluntary activities in sport in promoting active citizenship (2011/C 372/06).
 - Council Resolution on the key features of a European Sport Model (2021): volunteering as a key feature of a European Sport Model.
 - European programmes related to the promotion of volunteering such as the European Voluntary Service and the European Solidarity Corps.
 - The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, which includes measures to support youth engagement and participation in various fields, including sports.
 - Erasmus+ Programme: funding for projects aimed at promoting volunteering and voluntary work in sports.
 - European Sports Charter (2021) whose general principles promote sports in Europe.
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