



PODCAST 7

VOLUNTEERING AND COMMUNITY

ACTION AS PILLARS OF SOCIAL

SOLIDARITY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION



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Welcome to our podcast. In this episode we will explore the vital role that volunteering and community action plays in promoting social solidarity in the European Union.

If you have listened to our previous podcasts you will already know that the key topic we are focusing on is social solidarity. We may have already explored volunteering in a few words across other episodes but today we will dive deeper into it!

So let's make a start.

Volunteering plays a crucial role in promoting social solidarity, which is the bond that connects people within communities and societies, ensuring mutual support, cooperation, and shared responsibility. In the context of the European Union and globally, volunteering as part of social solidarity creates stronger, more cohesive communities, reduces inequalities, and empowers individuals to actively participate in shaping society.

Volunteering strengthens social capital, which refers to the networks of relationships and trust within a community. When people volunteer, they interact with others, build relationships, and develop trust, creating a network of social support that extends beyond their immediate circle. This leads to a more resilient and cooperative society.



It also bridges gaps between diverse groups in society, fostering a sense of inclusion. Volunteers often work with marginalized groups such as refugees, the elderly, people with disabilities, or low-income families—and help integrate them into the broader community. This process helps create a more inclusive society where no one is left behind.

Individuals are encouraged to take an active role in their communities, thus fostering a sense of responsibility and civic engagement. By volunteering, individuals directly contribute to solving problems, improving local infrastructure, or supporting social causes.

What programs are available across The European Union for volunteering?

European Solidarity Corps

This EU program funds young people who wish to volunteer or work on solidarity projects in their home countries or abroad. Volunteers can be engaged in initiatives such as environmental protection, social inclusion, or education, with a strong focus on building social capital within local communities. For example, a volunteer might work in a local school to provide language support for immigrant children or help organize community-building events. The personal connections built through these experiences create a lasting impact on the social fabric of the community, where trust and collaboration are strengthened.

The European Voluntary Service

This service is a key initiative under the Erasmus+ program and allows young people aged 17–30 to volunteer in another country for a period of up to 12 months. This initiative not only gives young people the opportunity to contribute to social inclusion programs abroad but also fosters mutual understanding between cultures.

For instance, young volunteers might work with disadvantaged groups, refugees, or children with disabilities, supporting local efforts to integrate these groups into society. Through such experiences, volunteers help promote inclusion while gaining valuable skills, broadening their worldview, and creating bonds across borders.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

The Red Cross plays a central role in providing aid to vulnerable populations in Europe, particularly refugees and migrants. Many national Red Cross organizations in the EU rely on thousands of volunteers to assist in refugee camps and provide services such as language lessons, psychological support, and guidance on integration. For example, the German Red Cross regularly recruits volunteers to assist in refugee shelters, helping newcomers navigate complex legal and social systems, and providing immediate relief in emergency situations.



Now let's explore volunteering opportunities that EU countries offer!

Finland

Volunteer-run initiatives like community cafes or local social clubs are common. These settings offer spaces for people of all backgrounds to come together, exchange ideas, and support each other. The volunteers gain new skills, and their communities benefit from strengthened relationships and shared resources.

France

The Food Bank Network in France relies on volunteers to collect, sort, and distribute food to families in need. These food banks are especially important in tackling food insecurity and supporting those who struggle to meet basic needs. Volunteers in these programs help ensure that disadvantaged individuals have access to nutritious food, reducing inequality and promoting solidarity among citizens.

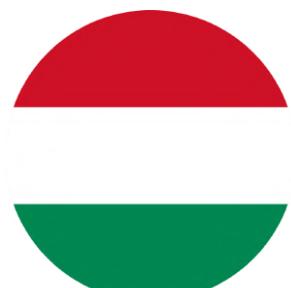
Ireland

The Community Land Trusts (CLTs) in Ireland are nonprofit organizations created by communities to collectively own and manage land for affordable housing and community projects. These trusts often rely on volunteers to help organize housing developments, environmental initiatives, and local events. A notable example is the Cloughjordan Ecovillage in Ireland, which is a cooperative project where local people volunteer their time to create sustainable living spaces. CLTs, like this one, help to create more affordable and inclusive communities, strengthening local bonds.



Spain

Timebanking is a form of community exchange where people volunteer time to help others and earn "time credits" that they can use for receiving services in return. In Madrid, timebanks have become a popular way for individuals to foster social connections while providing a meaningful form of exchange. This system not only creates a sense of reciprocity but also helps reduce social isolation, as participants are encouraged to engage in a variety of activities, from helping the elderly to tutoring children, all while building trust and social ties within their community.



Hungary

In Hungary, a community-led initiative called "A Bottle of Solidarity" was launched to help refugees and homeless individuals. Volunteers collect bottles of water and other essentials to distribute to vulnerable populations. This project raises awareness about the challenges faced by migrants and those living in poverty, and through such campaigns, EU citizens are encouraged to engage with issues of social justice and contribute to local and global solidarity.

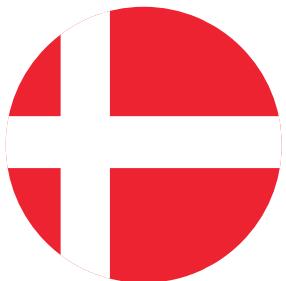


Slovakia

Slovakia has a Social Innovation Fund which supports volunteer-led and community-driven initiatives focused on solving social challenges like unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. For instance, in Bratislava, volunteers are involved in social enterprises that train young people in skills such as carpentry or digital literacy, which improves their employability and promotes long-term social inclusion. The success of these initiatives provides valuable insights into innovative approaches that can be scaled or adapted to other EU member states.



Denmark



The Cycling Without Age initiative in Denmark involves volunteers who use specially designed tricycles to take elderly people on rides, giving them the opportunity to reconnect with nature and enjoy outdoor activities. The program is not only beneficial for physical health, but it also has a positive impact on mental well-being, reducing feelings of isolation and giving the elderly an opportunity to engage with the wider community.

Can taking part in programs like we have just described improve people's mental health?

The answer is yes. Volunteering has been shown to improve mental health, both for the volunteers and the recipients of their help. Engaging in meaningful work that benefits others fosters a sense of purpose and accomplishment, which can reduce feelings of stress, loneliness, or anxiety. Volunteers often support those dealing with mental health challenges, such as through peer support programs or mental health hotlines, helping to create a more compassionate society.

Volunteering is integral to shaping a culture of solidarity, where citizens not only care about their own well-being but also prioritize the welfare of others. By actively participating in volunteer work, individuals help create a societal norm of mutual care, which encourages greater empathy, cooperation, and collective responsibility. Volunteering is much more than a simple act of giving.

It is a powerful tool for creating social solidarity. By volunteering, individuals contribute to the well-being of others, reduce inequalities, and build stronger, more resilient communities.

In the context of the European Union volunteering helps foster inclusion, democracy, and a sense of shared European identity. Volunteering promotes empathy, strengthens social bonds, and reinforces the principles of fairness and justice central components of social solidarity. Whether in local communities or across borders, volunteering is a practical and effective way to build the inclusive, resilient, and compassionate societies we all aspire to create.

Through a combination of local, national, and EU-wide initiatives, volunteering and community action create a web of social solidarity across Europe. Whether it's helping refugees, providing mental health support, promoting sustainable living, or supporting democratic engagement, these efforts strengthen the EU's core values of unity, democracy, and equality. By continuing to promote such initiatives, the EU fosters a sense of collective responsibility and shared purpose, which is essential for building a more inclusive and resilient society.

We hope you enjoyed this episode and we have inspired you to volunteer and take some action within your community. Please like and subscribe to tune into the next episode where we explore the relationship between social solidarity and sustainability. See you next time!



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