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# VOLUNTEUROPE First European Workshop on Volunteer Action

by Susan J. Ellis

## Highlights of Opening Keynote Address by Susan J. Ellis

The following was presented at the first European conference on volunteerism in 1992 and is shared here for those who want to consider what those of us in the field of volunteerism have in common on the global level.

Why has an American been asked to open this event? Perhaps it neatly avoids elevating one European country over another, but I suspect the main reason was that your colleagues in North America have proven the value of this type of organized networking. The United States does not have all the best ideas in volunteerism, but we are evolving workable models of supporting one another as leaders of volunteers. We have developed associations and conferences that allow us to exchange techniques and mutual concerns. On behalf of your American counterparts, I welcome you to this conference as a vital first step in expanding our sense of partnership.

I have been asked to share my vision of volunteerism in order to broaden yours, but as my crystal ball is no more or less accurate than any of yours, my role is really to stimulate your thinking about your opinions and goals. As leaders of volunteers, we must be articulate about what we do and why we do it.

Why? Because it seems to be a global fact that, while volunteers are recognized for their many contributions, they remain undervalued in the context of institutions and professions. Volunteers are the "invisible influence," assumed but rarely the focus of attention. Those who lead volunteers are likewise often isolated and frustrated.

The invisibility of volunteering results in many misconceptions. One is that somehow volunteers are a substitute for adequate funding. It is up to us to affirm that social problems require both volunteers and money. Another

misconception is that advocates of the "voluntary sector" or of "NGOs" automatically speak for volunteer issues. Not true. Many NGOs resist the involvement of volunteers in the delivery of services, while volunteers are also highly active in government-administered programs.

The goal we all share is to place volunteers and volunteerism on the agenda --so that volunteers and those who coordinate them can be supported and valued in ways that count.

As more and more countries face economic crises, attention turns to volunteers as a "second choice" way of providing services. It is up to us to emphasize the first choice reasons why volunteering is so important:

For organizations, volunteers bring:

- credibility
- advocacy
- a sense of community ownership
- the "luxury of focus"
- equality of participation
- service that matters to the recipient

Keep in mind that it is only one model for volunteers to "assist" in an organization. Volunteers can be partners, team members, and innovators. And a vast arena is the all-volunteer association in which there are no or only a small core of paid staff.

For individual volunteers, volunteering provides:

- the chance to stand up for one's beliefs
- freedom of choice
- the opportunity to contribute

- a chance to be well-rounded, balancing job, family, and community
- a form of "self-help" rather than "charity"

For society, volunteers are vital because they:

- recognize needs before any institution or business does
- can take up unpopular causes and make them popular
- can cross political and national boundaries as private citizens

Europe is presently undergoing massive change in almost every aspect of social and economic life. It would be presumptive of me to try to offer predictions or solutions, but I would like to share some of the questions that are in my mind as I come to this conference. Perhaps these will evoke other questions from you and we can grapple with these issues during our time together.

- How can volunteers go beyond political and national boundaries to find mutual solutions for mutual problems facing us all, such as AIDS, pollution, or crime?
- How do we find a legitimate balance between "professionalizing" the "management" of volunteers while still maintaining the unique "amateur" (for the love of something) quality of volunteering?
- How can we find and use the commonalities between the two major components of the volunteer world: the agency- related volunteer program and the all-volunteer association?
- How will volunteering stand up to the animosity of trade unions? We actually can have the shared goal of 100% employment and 100% volunteering.
- What role will volunteering play in dealing with aging? As seniors begin to be seen as three sub-groups (the young elderly, the middle elderly, and the oldest elderly), how will we accommodate volunteer roles? How can we take the leadership in deploying the talents of senior volunteers as well as in providing services to older people through volunteers?
- How can we strengthen Volunteer Centers/Bureaus to do the job we need them to do?
- Can volunteering again be a vehicle for elevating women, rather than be rejected by women as undervalued labor? Historically, in the United States volunteering gave women a voice they could get no other way. Might this still be a field in which women can rise to the top? But at the same time, how do we equalize the gender roles?
- What role can volunteers play in helping the citizens of the European Communities break down the lingering mistrust and intercultural prejudices of centuries of tradition?

- As immigration and racial diversity increase throughout Europe, can volunteers help break down discrimination barriers, too?
- How can societies that relied primarily on the state for services re-discover the value of participative democracy and the role of citizen involvement in service delivery? This includes volunteers in government services, too.
- As the world grows smaller, how will the tradition of European and American volunteering be received by Africa and Asia--and what will we learn in return about how those continents deal with social problems?
- How do we agree on and then teach others a common vocabulary for what volunteering is and does?

In our daily work, leaders of volunteers are often isolated. Alone we can do little, together we can do so much more. We need one another and networks such as Volonteurope or the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA). When we come together in conferences such as this one, we must share how we do things as well as "what" it is we do.

Finally, we also have to be concerned with political action as well as with direct service. Volunteers rarely speak for themselves. As leaders of volunteers we must be clear on what volunteers need in order to be most effective and then we need to advocate for that in an articulate way--to make volunteering visible and on the agenda!

**Note:** Check our list of [international conferences](#) to find out when the next VOLUNTEUROPE Conference is scheduled.

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