

Voluntary engagement and active citizenship in Europe: the role of Churches

The social dimension of the EU is usually addressed from a global perspective. It is questioned why a social Europe has not been enough promoted in the context of an historical crisis and how a renewed social dimension could be built up in correspondence with a strengthened monetary, budgetary and political integration.

But those considerations suggest high level political initiatives from the European Council or from a renewed European Commission. They might be part of a new European strategic Agenda taking into account the frustrations and anxieties of the peoples of Europe which has been expressed with great insistence as witnessed by a huge turn over at the occasion of the European Parliament elections one month ago.

The topic under consideration for our Jesuit social week is rather bottom up. It starts from the experience of many of the young Jesuits in our audience who are already engaged on the ground in a voluntary organization, providing support to those in need in the various member states. They act either within catholic organizations or within lay movement sharing a common social perspective. But this voluntary engagement is more than social support. In our days where the boundaries between political and civil life are blurred, social engagement also means active citizenship. It points upon a direction in which it recommends the society as a whole to be engaged in. It advocates public authorities upon some missing links, some gaps which need urgently to be filled if social cohesion or according to the wording of the Catholic social teaching the “common good”, are to be taken up seriously.

The EU is particularly concerned by the active citizenship (some time I shall use a different expression like social activism) of volunteering. This is because the distance between the voters and the Institutions is especially large, therefore “representative” democracy is fragile and needs being supplemented by “participatory” democracy where active citizenship plays its role.

I shall try to investigate further the active citizenship dimension which stems up from volunteering:

- Summing up some basic facts and figures on volunteering in the EU;
- Picturing the various focus of active citizenship, as it is promoted at national and EU level by the most social part of voluntary organizations.
- Analysing the ambiguous stance of those voluntary European organizations in the context of the so called European civil dialogue
- And finally discussing what might be the specific contribution of Church organization or of a Christian volunteer acting within the voluntary sector.

Basic facts and figures

It might be useful to start with recalling what “volunteering” exactly means in the EU and how it has become such a significant part of European societies, if not the European process itself.

Let us first recognize that volunteering has acquired since almost half of a century a strong political meaning, at least at a transnational level thanks to the United Nations. Since the early 70ies, the United Nations , which are poor in power but strong in promoting worldwide imagination, have identified volunteering as a key driver of an autonomous capacity of NGO’s. In the somewhat loose context of the UN, voluntary organizations incarnate a transnational actor , fit for promoting human and social rights along the UN Charter, and later on environmental rights , therefore sustaining peace and social development beyond the reach of national governments . In that circumstance, the UN provided the first initial definition of voluntary activities. They are characterized by:

- The individual freedom of commitment;
- *Social or environmental purpose with a clear orientation towards “serving others”;
- No remuneration for those activities ;
- No substitution to paid employment.

From this moment, at least in an international setting, volunteering was strongly connected with active citizenship. Somewhat later in the early 90ies, the EU joined into the recognition of volunteering as a driver of European citizenship. This did not mean that Voluntary organization had no influence

previously in the EU context; but this was mainly focused upon cooperation and development with former European colonies. The new and strong move was encouraged by the perspective of Enlargement to former communist countries. In those eastern and central European countries volunteering had been de facto superseded by state and political control over the civil society. Progressively the Amsterdam Treaty (1997), the Nice treaties (2000) provided some formal legal basis for the recognition of volunteering as a key element of European active citizenship. That recognition came altogether with the perceived need to anchor the European institutions on some more fundamental grounds, such as a European Charter of fundamental human rights and principle. Also frequently based upon the values of Human rights, voluntary organizations could be seen as a sort of “People of Europe. With the adoption of the European governance white paper (2001), the EU Commission offered a process of “structured dialogue “between institutions and the “civil society “in which voluntary organization were playing a pivotal role.

However, amongst the EU institutions, the EESC was the most concerned in opening ways for participation of the civil society in the so called “civil dialogue”. With the participation of the most influential European networks of voluntary social and environmental organization (European alliance of voluntary organizations), it completed the initial UN definition with the concept of “voluntary service “. It pointed upon a sort of hard core at the heart of European volunteering characterized by:

- Full time engagement even if limited in time ;
- Clear focus on precise social and development goals
- No remuneration but social protection and reimbursement of costs incurred by the civil engagement

A milestone, the European year for volunteering 2011

During the last decade, following the governance White Paper, the importance of civil dialogue and European volunteering kept growing. Based upon a report from the European economic and social Committee in 2006, it was decided to call 2011 the European year for Volunteering. It was based upon the findings of a comprehensive report about the strength and weaknesses of Volunteering across the EU. The facts which I should briefly report about volunteering in the

EU are drawn from that GHK 2010 report upon the request of DG EAC were the following:

- Volunteering is a very old feature of European societies coming back to the Middle age. According to the variety of cultural and religious traditions across the EU, volunteering is unevenly spread across EU member states. In average, about 20 to 25 % of above 15 years old population (between 100 and 150 million people) declare “having participated in the last 12 months in voluntary activities”. But at least four groups of Member states should be identified : very high voluntary activity (around 40%) in Aut, UK, Se , NL; high voluntary activity (between 30 and 40%) in Fl, Dk, Ge, Lux; medium high (20 to 30%) in Fr , Be, Est, Lv; low voluntary activity (10 to 20%) in most of the Mediterranean countries and the majority of East European countries ; very low (less than 10) in It and Bulg.
- In western European nations, engagement in voluntary activities grows with ageing, whereas in Eastern European only the young generations are really concerned.
- Looking at the sector of voluntary activities, figures are not quite reliable. However it seems clear that in general most of voluntary activities take place in sport and leisure (13%), then come educational, cultural and social activities (8%), participation in church activities (6%), and engagement in political or trade Union organizations (4%).
- There is a clear trend towards increased participation in volunteering since around ten years, across the EU. Figures are quite impressive: Fr plus 4% per year in the last decade; Italy plus 300% from 1995 to 2007; Pl plus 19% 2004/2007.

According to the GHK 2010 study those increasing trends are to be correlated with the perceived crisis of the Welfare state. But we might also believe that those remarkable positive figures reflect a cultural shift in reaction to the dominance of consumerism. People, especially the young generations wish to give a sense to their lives. At the same time, a large part of the retiring generations feels committed to transmit something of its experience as a matter of solidarity, experiencing a still impressive “life expectation in good health” .

To summarize , the availability for giving time and energy “serving other’s needs “seems to be one of the rare and very positive signs of the time across European nations of today. When Pope Benedict calls in 2009 in his Encyclica “Caritas in Veritate” for love and generosity as a vital ingredient for all components of the so called European social market economy, he does not, apparently, speak l a desert.

Focussing upon active citizenship from voluntary organizations across the EU

Against this favourable background, let us have a more precise look at the strong and structured organization of European networks or platforms as influential bodies amongst the EU institutions.

When it became clear at the turning point of the Maastricht Treaty that the EU had received a full political identity beyond its initial economic purpose, voluntary organization with a social, developmental or environmental purpose started focusing very heavily on EU institutions, mainly the supranational ie the Commission and the EP. Conversely, the latter wanted to seize the opportunity to gang up with a European civil society against the Member states. Many DG’s or EP committees provided assistance for the development and flourishing of the voluntary networking. A tentative mapping of the European networks of voluntary organizations should consider three pillars:

1. The environmental and very powerful pillar structured around the EEB with quite specific methods and ways of functioning.
2. The old cooperation and development pillar with a strong but de facto limited influence in the field of third country development and cooperation (CIDSE, Caritas, Oxfam).
3. The burgeoning social and human right pillar gathered by the *social platform* which I know personally from experience best.

Within the social pillar, it is useful to distinguish between two kinds of organizations:

- Those with a strong grip upon legal basis for action under the competences of the EU: the Women’s lobby; the non-discrimination umbrella’s such as European disability forum, Solidar, AEDH.

- Those with a weak grip in the absence of strong EU competences: EAPN, COFACE, FEANTSA, Eurochild , including organizations which promote the rights of migrants and asylum seekers .

Those three pillars, together with the Trade Unions, form the Spring Alliance, a sort of global coalition of the European civil society.

Let us also acknowledge the positive influence enjoyed by the Voluntary organizations networks.

The most powerful might be those active in the Environmental sphere. They have the most solid funding basis through possible alliances with business, as strange as it might appear, because precisely of their real impact upon EU regulations. They also enjoy strong roots at national level, at least in western and Nordic European countries.

However, social and developmental NGO's have been quite successful in shaping the European agenda in several circumstances, such as:

- The massive engagement of anti-poverty and pro-development Voluntary organizations made his point through with the major *debt relief* agreed upon at the occasion of the Millenium anniversary 2000.
- Anti-discrimination and People with a disability movement were successful in bringing the Commission in 2008 to proposing an *horizontal directive covering all kind of discriminations*.
- Since the 1996 Enlargement which gave Nordic and Scandinavian cultures an open door into the EU , the horizontal perspective of *gender mainstreaming* has been systematically developed along the recommendation of the European Women' lobby across all EU policies and firmly established within the 2009 Lisbon Treaty.
- The European Homeless federation was also quite successful in promoting, thanks to the support of the European Parliament the concept of *Housing first*, which still influences the social housing policies in various members states.

- More recently, taking advantage from the world and European financial crisis, a strong alliance of voluntary organization, including Oxfam and Caritas Europe played a significant role in convincing the European Council of Ministers and the European Parliament about the destabilizing role of tax heavens and lack of transparency of transnational trade flows allowing large companies operating in developing countries to escape from legitimate taxation. Those matters were almost absent from the European agenda some 10 years ago. Nowadays, it has become a matter of shared evidence.
- By contrast, the ability of Voluntary organizations to attract attention in the field of protection of the rights of migrants and asylum seekers seems to have been less effective, despite of the personal support of Pope François. However, the story is not at its end.

To summarize, Voluntary organization European networks , acting on the basis of their knowledge and experience acquired on the ground , using all opportunities provided at European level , have been more and more engaged in advocacy and communication activities in a quite successful way, promoting a quasi political way of shaping the European agenda .

It is fair however to note that not everybody is happy with those developments. Even if not expressed loudly, there are some important reservations coming from some quarters within the Trade Unions (who fear a competition between social and civil dialogue) and also some quarters of the European parliament (who fear a competition between representative and parliamentary democracy).

Active citizenship promoted by voluntary organizations are not safe from any ambiguity

Beyond any kind of jealousy, I wish also to point out the sometime ambiguous influence of voluntary organization. It has not to do with lack of transparency or accountability, even if Voluntary organizations need always to be vigilant. It is rather about what I would call a risk of *an excessively pragmatic stance* , turning to a lack of a deep rooted sense of what is the human being , what

means human dignity, where it comes from and more generally about the interrelation between human rights and the Common good . I shall base myself, when daring those interrogations, mainly upon my own experience as a director for social protection and social integration inside the European Commission during many years. Those interrogations are the following:

- Sometimes, not always, voluntary organization are very much “one sided” .This situation is aggravated by lawyers who tend to put anything in boxes with specific purposes. When fighting absolutely for making their case heard, VO sometime miss the global political picture. They are sometimes more interested in results, than in identifying causes and origins of the diseases they wish to fight. Therefore, during the last decade, the anti-poverty fight concentrated all its attention to denouncing inequality of opportunities, therefore a little bit neglecting the question of income inequalities, being an important cause of poverty. This could give the impression that fighting poverty was a matter for public authorities , NGO’s and the poor people, not a matter for the society as a whole
- Similarly, particularly in the field of non-discrimination, VO have insisted upon the rights to access (particularly in the case of people with disabilities), as if an inclusive society was just a society with equal rights for each individual member. This meant implicitly a vision where people are pure individuals and do not rely upon mutual relations, mutual recognition, to grow human. Sometime it happened that I had to argue against some social activist, trying to make clear that social rights are not individual rights delivered by some public authority, but rights underpinned by a vision in which communities are the foundation through which theoretical rights can be effective.
- Similarly, an extreme view about human rights as the alpha and omega of society goes in hand with a quite liberal, meaning anti state, orientation. Insisting upon rights, while forgetting about the capabilities, (freedom to make use of the rights) goes in hand with harsh criticism against any kind of public expenditures. However, public utilities and basic public services with universal access, such as health, housing , child

care , are needed to ensuring that those far from the labour market can go back to decent work.

- Decent work and a proper functioning labour market is sometime largely forgotten in the visions of many VO. This might have encouraged some negative trends in the last decade against the role of social partners dialogue in promoting a truly inclusive labour market.
- More in general , and this will lead to the last part of my presentation, the ambiguity which sometimes threatens active citizenship comes from the absence of a compass indicating how the definition and implementation of human rights should be related to a vision of the common good of the society as a whole .

Voluntary engagement and active citizenship from the point of view of Churches

Whereas volunteering activities, especially at European level, are clearly committed to promoting the values of social justice or solidarity, is there any kind of added value from the churches when promoting volunteering through their own church organizations, or through encouraging membership of their Christian members such as the young European Jesuits?

When discussing the risks of ambiguity embedded in the pragmatist attitude on human rights, I have already paved the way towards the contribution of churches and Christian. It is true that social justice is a fundamental value also from the point of view of the catholic social teaching. In the famous Compendium, four values are mentioned: justice; freedom, peace, but above all “love “in other words Caritas.

What does it mean that Caritas is above Justice, is at the roots of justice, peace and freedom?

It does not mean that the conditions for justice are not to be met first for any kind of individual assistance or support to be effective. Indeed, the Catholic social teaching insists that individual goodwill will never replace a fair redistribution of wealth by means of rights and legal enforcement. And lot of criticism can be raised on this about the present situation within the EU.

The privileged position of “Caritas “ amongst the founding values through which a society might be structured along the search of the common good comes from the fact that it should inspire the ways through which we intend to promoting equal rights , a fair distribution of wealth , access to the basic goods. Here lies the added value from a Christian perspective : ensuring that in the day to day ,as in the long term handling of voluntary activities , in their humble making and in the noble task of active citizenship, love, generosity are the clarifying guides helping to find the right ways through complex , ambivalent situations. Love is an instrument of discernment, the compass we need.

So what does the specific Christian touch or “Christian style” to quote a famous Jesuit Theologian, Christoph Theobald mean for voluntary engagement and active citizenship? You will in a few minutes offer your own experience in response. I might suggest three things:

- Humility. Voluntary organizations are not always peaceful .As members do not look for financial reward, they are all the more motivated by other kinds of recognition, esteem from the peers. Acting for social justice might sometime turn into very arrogant attitudes and lead to dangerous rivalries within the organization. Humility creates a positive contrast. It reminds that all members receive a mission; they do not own the organization.
- Open heartedness. Acting in the name of ethical principles can lead to very divisive posture within the society. Human rights lead organizations always run the risk to divide the world in bad and good guys. This is the ultimate weakness of moralism: it deters people to become followers. It is the situation which raised the initial criticism of Pope Frances against catholic movement who were primarily asking very high moral standards and discouraged people to join. But this criticism holds true also with many Voluntary organizations: they are so much pre occupied by putting a legitimate pressure upon the governments or upon companies (the two evils) that they do not care much about harnessing, involving the ordinary citizens. Active citizenship should be far from elitist and think with love about how to help ordinary people joining.

- Creativity and imagination. What means putting love as a source of inspiration for voluntary activities? It means moving at the heart of the inspiration of generosity. Generosity is the consequence of a gift. It grows once we have experienced that those we were supposed to help or support are indeed also those who make us alive, who drive us to the real truth of our lives. A sign of Christian presence in voluntary organization is creativity: learning from those in need, listening really to the vulnerable is an invaluable resource for imagination and creativity of new processes and new thinking.

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