Volunteering Landscape and the European Union Aid Volunteers Initiative
Volunteering Landscape and the European Union Aid Volunteers Initiative

The European Union (EU) is currently rolling out an ambitious volunteering initiative, the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative (EUAVI). Within this, funding is granted to both volunteer sending and hosting organisations to improve their standards in volunteer management and humanitarian practice. The ‘Volunteering in Humanitarian Aid’ (VolinHa) consortium is supported under the strand of the Initiative that focuses on technical assistance for sending organisations and capacity building for hosting organisations. It has been running since September 2015 and will finish in September 2017: the technical assistance stream of the project includes nine European partners that have worked together to share knowledge on volunteer management and humanitarian practice with the aim, for most, of applying for certification in order to deploy volunteers.

An important aim of VolinHa, and the EUAVI overall, is to bridge the knowledge gap between organisations with expertise in humanitarian aid and those with experience in volunteer management. In order to do this we must better understand the complexities and potential of this type of volunteering, because for many volunteer sending and hosting organisations, it is more common for their work in the global south to take place in development settings, even if located in disaster prone countries. This research paper aims to contribute to our understanding of these questions. It commences with an analysis of the evolution of the Initiative, and then maps the landscape of volunteering for humanitarian action across four European countries: Ireland, Latvia, Cyprus and Greece, discussing how the EUAVI could add value to the volunteering landscape in each. The unique position of volunteering in humanitarian contexts will then be discussed, and the potential for humanitarian volunteering and the role of the EUAVI will be analysed, with a number of recommendations for the future identified.

Volunteering in humanitarian contexts is becoming an increasingly important area of study because of the recognition that there needs to be a stronger connection between the development and humanitarian agendas. How to achieve this stronger connection was one of the key themes discussed at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. The development-humanitarian nexus is also highlighted in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which span the humanitarian and development agendas. Therefore, it is crucial to understand where volunteering fits into these broader trends, and how it can make a meaningful contribution to achieving the SDGs and building resilience through humanitarian action. The connection between the development and humanitarian contexts can be seen most clearly in the area of climate change, which often requires immediate crisis relief but also long term strategic planning to prevent further damage to the planet (UNV: 2011: 73).

Another example of the need for a greater link between the humanitarian and development agendas occurred during the Ebola crisis, when it became clear that national health services could not be sustained during the outbreak and thus the humanitarian crisis worsened because local systems were not strong enough to treat people and prevent further spreading of the disease. Volunteering, and particularly the EUAVI, offers an opportunity to organise projects that encapsulate elements of longer-term development work and more immediate crisis prevention and recovery.
The methodology for this paper involved a desk based literature review and a survey (Annex 1) carried out with people who are working in the area of volunteer management in Cyprus, Greece, Ireland and Latvia. There are a number of limitations to this work, including a limited timeframe for the research. At the time when it was conducted, no volunteers had yet been deployed under the EUAVI and therefore much of the assessment was based on evaluations of the pilot projects and the vision set out in the Regulation governing its establishment. To date, there has been limited analysis and research carried out on the Initiative: this paper aims to address some of the gaps in available materials by contributing to the body of work that has been published.

What is the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative?

The EUAVI is a project of the European Union which allows EU citizens to volunteer and contribute to humanitarian action through local capacity building, disaster risk reduction and rehabilitation projects. The aims of the EUAVI are to: deploy 4,000 EU citizens to work on humanitarian projects; provide 4,400 volunteers and NGO staff from outside the EU with capacity building opportunities; and provide opportunities for 10,000 online volunteers between 2015 and 2020. There are various ways to become involved in the EUAVI: as a volunteer, a sending organisation or a hosting organisation. In order to participate in the initiative as a sending or hosting organisation, there is a requirement to become certified by the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) of the European Commission, which is administering the Initiative’s certification and funding on behalf of DG ECHO. Online volunteering assignments will also provide opportunities for volunteers from around the world to support humanitarian action (ECHO: 2016). The certification process involves the submission of a detailed evidence-based self-assessment form. Once the organisation is certified, they can then apply for funding for deployment projects: every deployment project must involve at least two EU partners and two non-EU hosting partners. There are other ways for organisations to become involved in the Initiative, through capacity building and technical assistance programmes that fund activities that strengthen the capacities of sending and hosting organisations intending to participate in the EUAVI. Technical assistance is specifically aimed at organisations inside the EU, while capacity building is aimed at organisations in countries outside the EU.
The Evolution of the EUAVI

In the Commission's communication, 'First reflections on a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps', published in 2010, they note several important issues and explain the rationale behind the initiative. The communication outlines the guiding principles of the project: solidarity, humanitarian principles, professionalism and safety, and added value (COM(2010) 683 final). It also puts forward the case for why this type of volunteering is important and should be the focus of this ambitious scheme: 'Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) activities, aimed at reducing the risk of disaster is having local people an opportunity to learn and grow within this sector.

In the subsequent Regulation establishing the Initiative, humanitarian aid is defined as: 'activities and operations in third countries intended to provide needs-based emergency assistance aimed at preserving life, preventing and alleviating human suffering, and maintaining human dignity in the face of man-made crises or natural disasters. It encompasses assistance, relief and protection operations in humanitarian crises or their immediate aftermath, supporting measures to ensure access to people in need and to facilitate the free flow of assistance, as well as actions aimed at reinforcing disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction, and contributing towards strengthening resilience and capacity to cope with, and recover from, crises' (Council and Parliament Regulation (EU) 375/2014 of 14 April 2014).

This definition of humanitarian activities is quite broad and encompasses a multitude of activities and projects from more traditional humanitarian projects such as WASH projects, to community development projects aimed at training local volunteers to prepare for disasters. In 2011 and 2012 there were two rounds of pilot projects organised in order to test out the whole volunteer lifecycle, from recruitment to the post-return of volunteers. The Spanish NGO Alianza Por La Solidaridad (APS) was heavily involved in the pilot phases of the initiative and wrote an evaluation report based on their experiences (APS: 2013). APS states in this report that there are two main purposes of the EUAVI: volunteers contributing to the ability of the EU to deliver humanitarian aid, and the ability of volunteers to raise awareness both during their deployment and after they return. They additionally highlight three important points in their report: the challenge of linking volunteering and humanitarian aid; the EUAVI’s potential to link relief and development; and the importance of local volunteering structures for the success of the Initiative.

Firstly, APS note that there is an inherent challenge in volunteering in humanitarian contexts because this form of volunteering requires ‘the commitment to providing a voluntary service’ combined with ‘the right and sufficient skills and abilities to carry it out’ (APS: 2013: 19). Concerns about recruiting young, potentially less qualified, people were also raised in a review of the EUAVI’s original iteration: key stakeholders were concerned that the Initiative would undermine the general drive towards the professionalization of humanitarian interventions (DG ECHO/EVHAC review 2010: 12). This highlights one of the major challenges for the initiative, which is to find the balance between the need for candidates with the motivation to volunteer and the candidates who have the technical skills which the project requires. Presumably in an attempt to address these concerns, the EUAVI currently offers two types of volunteer profiles: a junior professional profile who is expected to have less than five years’ experience and a senior professional who will have more than five years’ experience. Each volunteer post will specify whether they require a junior or senior professional. This system appears to be how the EUAVI plans to find the balance between requiring people with specific skills and experience to carry out complex projects while also offering younger people an opportunity to learn and grow within this sector.

Secondly, the issue of how the EUAVI can add value to the existing volunteer and humanitarian structures is very important. APS notes that due to the nature of this volunteering scheme, it has the potential to link relief and humanitarian aid to development in a more coherent way (APS: 2013:13). The EUAVI definition of humanitarian activities could encompass a broad range of projects, and there is an opportunity to see how this closing of the gap could
work in practice, and where there are flaws in the systems which are preventing greater linkages between the two sectors. If the EUAVI can organise placements that focus on preparing sustainable systems that can function during crises and facilitate trainings and the development of action plans to reduce the risks to people when crisis hits, it will contribute to reducing the development-humanitarian divide in a tangible way.

Finally, APS notes that in order for the initiative to have a sustainable impact, the EUAVI projects must engage with and work alongside local volunteering structures. Part of the vision of the Initiative is that EU Aid Volunteers will work alongside local volunteers in order to improve disaster preparedness or to develop rehabilitation projects that include the views and experiences of local communities. APS notes that “by including working with volunteers, APS humanitarian actions take on a more social character; they are shared with a society (social base, social organizations, funders, etc.), and by such, greater ownership is achieved” (APS:2013:30). The importance of local volunteers and building the capacity of civil society through this Initiative was also highlighted by experts participating in a workshop reviewing the pilot phases of the project: they noted that “international volunteers [are] to complement local volunteers, not replace them” (Expert Workshop Summary Report: 2014:16). This will be a key aspect of the Initiative and needs to be central to how partnerships are developed between hosting and sending organisations.

A literature review of volunteering in four countries was undertaken: Cyprus, Greece, Ireland and Latvia. This was supplemented by the dissemination of a survey to key stakeholders in each country, which focused on both domestic and international volunteering. Key findings emerging were:

**Cyprus**

After independence in 1960, a welfare state was set up in Cyprus leading to the establishment of NGOs, charities and voluntary organisations to supplement state-provided services (Country Report Cyprus: 2010: 1). In 2006, the Pan Cypriot Volunteerism Coordinative Council (PVCC) was established, at the same time as which legal definitions of volunteering were articulated. In 2010, it was estimated that about 18% of the population were active volunteers in Cyprus (Country Report Cyprus: 2010: 2). The PVCC run the volunteering infrastructure in Cyprus, acting as a central council for volunteer centres located nationwide.

**Greece**

Traditionally volunteering was not an important feature of Greek society because “family and networks of relatives have always created the basic framework of mutual aid, solidarity and cooperation in Greece” (Country Report Greece:2010: 1). In an intriguing critique of how civil society and volunteering is perceived particularly in relation to Greece, Rozakou notes that volunteering is “not as developed as in the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian societies” (Rozakou: 2011). However in recent years, more non-profit and voluntary organisations have emerged and people’s interested in engaging in organised voluntary activities is increasing (Country Report Greece:2010: 1).
In addition, Greece is currently experiencing a humanitarian crisis with refugees arriving predominantly from Syria, yet the infrastructure to protect and look after these people is faltering. As a result, many people are now volunteering in Greece as part of the humanitarian response both through formal channels such as NGOs and more informal autonomous groups. The latter are never counted in the official statistics released about voluntary groups. The latter are never counted in the official statistics released about voluntary groups. This is an important point in relation to how the EU assesses civil society and volunteering, because perhaps by only classifying formal civil society structures it ignores the cultural norms that dictate how social movements arise in many southern European countries. This raises important questions about the nature of volunteering and whether the strict separation the EUAVI have placed on what is classified as sending or hosting country limits the ability of the Initiative to respond to the changing global context. For NGOs in Greece looking to offer opportunities for people to volunteer overseas, the EUAVI will be an important avenue to explore. Furthermore, for Greek people who may not have access to international volunteering opportunities the EUAVI will be a new chance to get involved in humanitarian action.

**Ireland**

There is a long tradition of volunteering in Ireland and this has been shaped by the socio-cultural context of Ireland’s development, with many non-profit and community groups supporting the provision of public services. The 2013 National Householder survey showed that 28.4% of people in Ireland volunteer on a regular basis (CSO: 2015). There is also a strong tradition of international volunteering for development in Ireland that stemmed initially from missionaries and has continued up to today. Comhláth is the Irish Association of Development workers and volunteers, working with returned development workers, volunteers and volunteer sending agencies. Comhláth promotes responsive, responsible volunteering and focuses particularly on using development education as means of supporting the continuous engagement of volunteers after their overseas placement is finished. In 2004, the Irish state, through Irish Aid, funded Comhláth to start the process of working to promote responsible volunteering and good practice in the area of international volunteering and thus the Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies was developed. A total of 42 organisations are currently signatories of the Code, which involves completing an annual self-audit process and undertaking regular external reviews, as well as participating in peer support meetings and training. Due to the experience of many Irish sending agencies with the Code and the self-assessment procedures that comes with it, seeking certification to become involved in the EUAVI will not be as new as it may be for agencies in other countries. In 2015 1,820 people undertook an international volunteer placement with 29 organisations (Comhláth: 2016:1). These volunteer placements predominately focus on traditional development issues such as education, support services for children, renovation and construction and do not focus specifically on humanitarian volunteering.

**Latvia**

Both through the survey carried out and the research report compiled for the European Year of Volunteering, it is clear that there is very little available information or data on volunteering in Latvia (Country Report Latvia: 2010: 1). Currently, the policy area of volunteering is split between various government departments and therefore it has dropped off the agenda of the state (Country Report Latvia: 2010: 2). Volunteering in Latvia is very loosely defined and it is not outlined in any specific legislative act (ESI Labs Respondent: 2016/Country Report Latvia: 2010).

There appear to be very few agencies that send volunteers to the global south and the ones that do seem to work from quite an individual basis with very little state support (Country Report Latvia: 2010: 13). Due to the lack of state support structures for volunteering both in terms of finance and administration, it would appear that achieving certification for EUAVI will be difficult for many small Latvian NGOs. The availability of technical assistance funding will be important for small agencies that want to apply for certification through the EUAVI.

**Case Studies Conclusion**

Across the four countries studied, it is clear that there are very few existing volunteering opportunities in the area of humanitarian action. Furthermore, it is evident that in Latvia, Cyprus and Greece there are very few international volunteering opportunities and the ones that are offered have very little structural support. In Ireland there is a comparatively large and well established international volunteering sector, which is guided by the standards set out in Comhláth’s Code of Good Practice. It is clear that the EUAVI offers a good opportunity for many of the agencies in these countries to access funding, training and partnerships. The lack of experience in volunteering overseas and humanitarian aid in three of these countries means the initial partnerships to get involved in the EUAVI could pose a challenge.

One of the major tensions that exists throughout this project is that on the one hand, the EUAVI aims to involve more EU countries in the process of sending volunteers and engaging with EU active citizenship initiatives; while on the other, it requires organisations to have experience in the field of humanitarian aid in order to be able to contribute to the humanitarian agenda of the EU. This tension means that for smaller volunteer sending agencies that do not have experience in humanitarian action and that are based in countries that do not have a tradition of sending volunteers overseas, it could be difficult to achieve certification and thus send volunteers through the EUAVI (Expert Workshop Summary Report Emergency Response Coordination Centre: 2014: 14).

This tension also exists for the hosting organisations: at the time of writing, it has mainly been the large international NGOs or field offices of big organisations that have been certified. The opportunities to avail of technical assistance and capacity building will aim to allow smaller organisations to become involved in the Initiative, and the outcome from these should be visible in the near future.
In a review of the EVHAC scheme it is confirmed that although there are a significant number of national schemes (EU and external) for sending young (and more experienced) volunteers abroad, these are all limited to various development cooperation activities in safe environments and cannot provide usable benchmarks for EVHAC (DG ECHO / EVHAC review 2010:14). In this sense the EUAVI is quite unique compared to many of the volunteer opportunities currently available. DG ECHO commissioned another report to assess the technical assistance and capacity building needs of hosting and sending organisations, as part of the preparations for the EUAVI. This study showed that ‘the main capacity building needs of local organisation are administrative capacity; financial management; needs assessment; monitoring and evaluation; advocacy; communication and PR; and technical skills’ (EU: Expert Workshop Report: 2014: 4).

Is the EUAVI unique and what is its potential? The United Nations volunteer scheme is a well-established volunteering structure which aims to contribute to peace and development through volunteerism. The UNV ‘directly mobilizes more than 7,700 UN Volunteers every year nationally and internationally, with 80 per cent coming from developing countries, and more than 30 per cent volunteering within their own countries’ (UNV.org). Therefore, the question must be asked, what is the value added of the EUAVI when the UNV system is so well established and already contributing to humanitarian action? The main difference between these schemes appears to be that the EUAVI takes a much more organisational approach, whereas the UNV scheme focuses much more on the individual volunteers working within the extensive UN system. The EUAVI scheme offers funding opportunities to organisations in the EU and in the global south, that are not part of state or UN systems, to improve their capacity, volunteer management systems and to share challenges and new ideas. Therefore, the EUAVI has the capacity to strengthen a third sector which is often underfunded both in the EU and in the global south. This is a very interesting aspect of the scheme and perhaps differentiates it from other similar schemes. The potential impact of the Initiative will be greater, because the improvements in the areas of volunteer management and partnership building between sending and host organisations will last longer than this initiative and create more pathways for people to become involved in the area of humanitarian action and development.

The focus on improving practice and building capacity is quite unusual. If these funding opportunities can be accessed by small hosting and sending organisations, this initiative could have a considerable impact. It is integral that the EUAVI volunteer placements are supplementary to the jobs already in place and that the scheme does not become a way for jobs to be filled by volunteers. The volunteer placements should be adding value and something different to the work of the organisation. If the Initiative is used in this way and volunteers are also allowed to contribute to designing their task assignment in line with their specific skills and experiences, the scheme could have a very positive impact on the host communities, the hosting organisation, the sending organisation and the volunteer. This focus on capacity building ties into some of the most important current themes in humanitarian action: localisation and subsidiarity. The most crucial factors in dealing with a humanitarian crisis are local people and civil society structures. Therefore, if the EUAVI can support the building up of civil society structures, local NGOs and local volunteers, it could be very beneficial in the short-term in relation to preserving life, and in the long-term by promoting self-sustaining and self-determined civil society movements which meet the needs of local communities.

**Conclusions**

**Recommendations**

Post-return engagement: In the regulation establishing the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps published in April 2014 it is noted: ‘Volunteering schemes exist in Europe and worldwide focusing on third country deployment. These are often national schemes which focus mainly or exclusively on development projects. The EU Aid Volunteers initiative should, therefore, add value by providing opportunities for volunteers to jointly contribute to humanitarian aid operations, thus reinforcing active Europe-
an citizenship. The EU Aid Volunteers initiative can also add value by fostering transnational cooperation of organisations participating in the implementation of the actions under the EU Aid Volunteers initiative, thereby improving international relations, projecting a positive image of the Union in the world and fostering interest in pan-European humanitarian projects (Council and Parliament Regulation (EU) 375/2014 of 14 April 2014: 2).

There is a clear emphasis on the importance of solidarity and European citizenship, but in order for this element to be achieved, there must be a focus on the post-return engagement of volunteers and development education in order for the volunteers to be able to explore issues of development, humanitarian action and social justice in a critical way. This will require the EUAVI to not only focus on training around security, health and safety and technical placement skills, but also development education and politics. In the Commission’s Implementing Regulation, there is specific mention of post-return engagement of the volunteer but it does not flesh out the practical elements of how the EUAVI intends to achieve this and begs the question of whether it is tokenistic in nature.

AVI will deal with the post-return phase of the volunteer cycle.

Partnerships: The requirement that every deployment project must include at least two EU organisations and two non-EU hosting organisations has the potential to achieve a greater sense of partnership between hosting and sending organisations. Although there is now a greater focus on needs-based projects both in development and humanitarian sectors, this is still an area that projects and organisations often fail to fully integrate into their operational processes. Issues relating to the degree of partnership in needs assessments and communication between hosting and sending organisations were highlighted across the four projects assessed in a workshop analysing the pilot projects of the scheme, entitled ‘EU Aid Volunteers: Assessing the needs and capacity gaps – a contribution to the humanitarian system’ (Expert Workshop Report: 2014: 10-13). The initiative needs to put partnership and engagement with stakeholders at the centre of everything it does, including in relation to how projects are carried out. This would mean that local communities would have a stake in how projects are planned, designed and implemented and that volunteers would be trained and prepared to work as facilitators within the local structures already in place. In terms of the outcomes of the projects and the dominant narratives in the areas of aid, volunteering and charity, this would be a considerable contribution to the sector.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the EUAVI offers a different approach to organising international volunteering, primarily in relation to organisational capacity building. At the time of writing, there have been no volunteers deployed as of yet and thus how the initiative pans out will be interesting. In terms of the countries studied here, the initiative definitely offers opportunities for NGOs to build capacity to send volunteers internationally and also to develop partnerships with other EU sending organisations and with organisations in the global south. Therefore, the opportunities for people from newer member states where international volunteering is not that well established will be enhanced through the EUAVI.

There are various challenges to be aware of, such as how to balance the need for professionalism with the motivation and commitment to volunteer and how to ensure that the volunteers are adding value to any project or organisation and not simply filling a paid staff position. It is vital that the placements organised through the EUAVI are based on needs and that all projects are built on strong and equal partnerships between the hosting organisation and the local community and the sending organisation. An important feature of the EUAVI is that placements will be funded and volunteers will receive a stipend. This is critical because it opens up the scheme to a broader range of people, eliminating barriers for people interested in volunteering in the sector. Many organisations are now trying to show how volunteering can contribute to achieving real change, as was seen in relation to the MDGs and now with the formal recognition of the role volunteers will play in achieving the SDGs. These narratives are trying to demonstrate that volunteering is not simply an add-on which only benefits the individual volunteer, but that as a collective force volunteers can contribute to improving and implementing development and humanitarian projects.

The Commission envisages the EUAVI volunteers contributing to the humanitarian effort of the EU: if this vision is integrated into the initiative and if volunteer placements are coherent with other projects of DG ECHO, it could lead the way in showing how volunteers and volunteering can meaningfully contribute to humanitarian action and development.
References


http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/q-vwb/qnhsvolunteeringandwellbeingq32013/


GHK (2014) ‘Assessment of capacity building and technical assistance needs and of needs in the humanitarian sector with regards to knowledge, skills and competences’ Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/euaidvolunteers/EUAV_Study_Needs_Assessment_en.pdf


Annex 1

Questions on the Volunteering Landscape

Is volunteering a common activity in your country? Is it culturally recognised as a valuable way of gaining experience and learning new things?

What kind of volunteer programmes does your organisation offer?

About how many people take part in international volunteering every year in your country (if known)? (International volunteering—volunteering to the global south)

Are there any other forms of volunteering that are common in your country, such as within the EU (EVS), United Nations Volunteers or domestic volunteer service?

Is there a national or state agency that organises or supports international or domestic volunteerising in your country?

From the organisations that do organise international volunteering how many from your knowledge send volunteer to humanitarian contexts (definition below)?

What is your organisation’s experience in humanitarian contexts?

Is there any state supported national framework or guidelines for volunteering in your country such as the Code of Good Practice?