

The National Advisory Board on  
Social Welfare and Health Care Ethics ETENE

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## ETHICS OF VOLUNTARY ACTIVITIES

Voluntary activities have long traditions in Finland, and, still today, they continue to complement the social welfare and health care services offered by society in a significant manner. Many forms of helping others that began as voluntary activities have since been rendered the obligations of society through regulation. Several volunteer organisations have cemented their position and have developed their operations into a more professional direction. Examples of this can be found from child welfare to caring for people with disabilities and the elderly. Yet, traditional voluntary activities still continue in a variety of forms and, in addition to NGOs, are organised by parishes and municipalities, and the central government supports the active participation of citizens, e.g. via Finland's Slot Machine Association.

In recent years, ETENE has been preparing ethical recommendations mainly for the needs of social welfare and health care services, but they are also applicable to voluntary activities.

- ETENE-publications 37: Aivot ja etiikka. Mikä kannustaa toimimaan eettisesti? (Brains and ethics. What makes us act ethically?) (2013)
- ETENE-publications 36: Saattohoito Suomessa vuosina 2001, 2009 ja 2012. Suunnitelmat ja toteutus (End-of-life care in Finland in 2001, 2009 and 2012. Plans and implementation) (2012)
- ETENE publications 35: Etiikan tila sosiaali- ja terveysalalla (Ethics in the field of social welfare and health care) (2012)
- ETENE-publications 34: [Ethical grounds for the social and health care field](#) (2011)
- ETENE-publications 31: Yhdenvertaisuus sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollossa. (Equality in social welfare and health care. National Advisory Board on Social Welfare and Health Care Ethics ETENE 2006–2010) (2011)

From an ethical standpoint, there is little difference between the activities of volunteers and the work of professionals. In both, the best interest of the client and the significance of interaction are highlighted. However, the special characteristics of voluntary activities also form grounds for a separate consideration of the matter. This position examines the status, significance and operating methods of volunteer work as part of the field of operations in social welfare and health care services. In its discussions, the Advisory Board focused particular attention to the question of the significance of voluntary activities today and in the future as the demand for services is increasing more rapidly than the resources available for producing them. Markku Lehto, as Chairman of the Advisory Board, prepared a manuscript that was then commented on by members of the Advisory Board. In its meeting on 6 March 2014, the Advisory Board approved the position produced in the above-described manner. The General Secretary of ETENE gathered comments provided by the members of the Advisory Board and incorporated them into this document.

### What constitutes voluntary activities?

In research, voluntary activities have traditionally been characterised through lack of remuneration and their voluntary nature, for example by describing them as "unpaid and unforced activities that are performed for the benefit of other people or the community"<sup>1</sup>. Like assistance provided by professionals, voluntary activities thus aim at helping others and solving problems. Its methods of implementation and schedules are, however, less rigid than in the case of help provided in a professional context. In the field of voluntary activities,

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<sup>1</sup> Hanifi, Riitta. Suomalaiset tekevät melko paljon vapaaehtoistyötä. (Finns are relatively active in the area of voluntary work.) Hyvinvointikatsaus 3/2011. Statistics Finland. [https://www.stat.fi/artikkelit/2011/art\\_2011-09-26\\_002.html](https://www.stat.fi/artikkelit/2011/art_2011-09-26_002.html). Retrieved 28 March 2014.



care and help provided to relatives or neighbours have traditionally been separated from other forms of volunteering, although in practice, the two are moving closer to one another. The same ethical principles apply to voluntary activities, peer support and the provision of assistance to friends and family members.

Voluntary activities cover a vast range of tasks belonging to the field of social welfare and health care from the helping of those excluded from society to end-of-life care. Help is provided in the daily life of people in areas such as household chores, management of affairs and the arranging of services, but volunteer work can also include art in different forms and the provision of expert assistance in the solving of problems. Voluntary activities may cover a narrow area or a broad spectrum of needs, involve one visit or continue for several years, be directed to an individual or a group, and constitute client work or consultation service.

### **Scope of voluntary activities**

According to time use survey from 2009 by Statistics Finland, less than one out of three Finns over 10 years of age had engaged in voluntary activities in the previous month and 40% in the previous year. The population groups that were the most active in this respect in 2009 were 45-to-64-year-olds, higher education graduates and, out of professional groups, entrepreneurs. The share of volunteers over 65 years of age has increased in the ten years of monitoring the situation. Out of the respondents, 59% had helped another household free of charge or against a small remuneration in a manner that counted as informal help provided to neighbours or close persons in the four weeks preceding the survey. The share of those participating in voluntary activities is relatively high also in an international comparison, and it has remained on much the same level compared to the previous survey in 1999.

In the age group of young people, the popularity of voluntary activities appears to be decreasing: in 1999 almost a third (28%) of 10-to-14-year-olds participated in volunteer work, in 2009 only less than one in five (19%). The participation of 15-to-24-year-olds in voluntary activities has reduced. The declining trend among young people does not apply to participation in the activities of sports clubs, however; in them, the level of activity would, in fact, appear to have increased.

The volume of voluntary activities is the greatest in sports and exercise clubs, neighbourhood associations, village associations and housing associations. Volunteering is also popular in parishes and associations focusing on a variety of freetime activities. Women participate more in voluntary activities organised by social welfare and health organisations and religious associations and in advisory services in agricultural and household matters and are more involved in the activities of schools and day-care centres as parents. In help provided to other households, men appear to engage in activities traditionally perceived as men's work (repairs, maintenance and outdoors work), whereas women tend to focus on tasks related to household chores, such as child minding, shopping and cooking. Men participated in voluntary activities more often than women, although the differences were small.

The level of participation in voluntary activities increases with the level of education. Assistance provided to other households seems to be directed more to people who are financially well-off. Highly educated people and upper-level employees received more help than manual workers, the unemployed and pensioners. Less help was provided to people who would appear to have needed it the most. Moreover, the networks of family and friends were the strongest among people that also possess other strengths.

Attempts have been made to determine the financial value of voluntary activities. If the value of voluntary activities is determined based on market-price remuneration for corresponding work, in the social welfare and health care sector alone the estimate reaches hundreds of millions of euros. One way of perceiving the situation is through support for informal care, which is paid to a total of 40,000 carers. Its financial value in 2012 was EUR 173 million. Only some of the people caring for their family members receive support for informal care, and the remuneration is small in relation to the time spent providing the care, meaning that the



cost would be much higher were the care to be provided through paid work. Based on surveys, a total of 300,000 people are estimated to have participated in the care of the elderly.

### **What powers voluntary activities?**

People take part in voluntary activities for a variety of different reasons. Many people have a genuine need for help, whereas others have the desire and courage to become volunteers. At least part of the need for voluntary activities is based on insufficient public services and the person in need of help not being able to purchase the service privately. Fundamentally, voluntary activities are also needed alongside perfectly sufficient public and market-based services: it is used to tackle problems in life management that can only be solved via equal interaction between two people unmotivated by the need to gain specific results.

The motivations of people undertaking voluntary work vary. Some of the helpers are inspired simply by the desire to help others in a concrete manner. Alleviating the suffering, loneliness and social exclusion of others gives them the strength they need to keep helping others while pursuing their own lives. Others wish to develop and grow as individuals and experience something new and worthwhile in their lives. They are looking for an arena in which they can feel they are important for someone. For some, maintaining the rhythm and life pattern familiar from working life is important. For many, volunteer work provides an opportunity to impact the world around them or simply satisfies their need for action. Often, these motivations can combine and change shape over the period in which the person participates in the activities.

Many organisations, municipalities and parishes actively recruit people for voluntary activities. Information on opportunities to take part in voluntary activities is provided e.g. in local newspapers and on the Internet, and enrolment has been made easy. The organisers are prepared to modify the activities according to the wishes of those participating, and efforts are made to account for their ideas when developing the activities. Organising sufficient training for those becoming involved in the activities is of crucial importance. Work counselling must also be available to those engaging in demanding human relations work. In some situations, volunteers can be provided with, for example, health services, particularly if the person taking part in the activities is subjected to health risks without their knowledge. They can receive remuneration for example for travel, telephone and other costs incurred through participation in the activities. The method of remuneration should be agreed upon in advance with the participating volunteers. The work of volunteers is supported by organising recreational activities and peer meetings. Possible damages and accidents are covered by insurance. Different organisations and operators have different practices in this respect that should be addressed with volunteers already at the training stage.

Moreover, it is important to remember that the volunteers rarely have solid experience in communications and the operating methods of the media. Consequently, it must be ensured that each volunteer is provided with support, advice and guidance particularly in situations where public interest is directed to their activities.

### **Differences and similarities between professional work and voluntary activities**

The objective should be set as reducing the gap between voluntary and professional work to help people, rather than highlighting the differences between the two. The training of volunteers contains elements that are included in vocational studies in the field. The better volunteers and professionals understand the concepts and language used by the other group, the more productive the activities are. For example, first-aid courses improve the capabilities of regular citizens to act in crisis situations either together with or separately from professionals. It is clear, however, that the statutory tasks of professionals in the field of social welfare and health care as government officials cannot be transferred to others.



Voluntary activities are not restricted by professional and administrative rules and practices in the same way as public and private services are. The opportunities contained in them are mostly to do with the holistic nature of the work. People's problems and difficulties with life management can be addressed on a case-by-case basis, perceiving them with an open mind and from a broad perspective. It is possible to adjust and re-think prior operating methods with each new person and changing situation. Often, the most important thing is encountering the person as an individual and hearing them out.

Voluntary activities are not subject to the same expectations pertaining to utility and effectiveness as professional activities. This provides more flexible opportunities for applying new operating methods and open-mindedly directing attention to any problems that may arise and to forgotten population groups. This freedom may be particularly beneficial for groups that professional helpers struggle to find productive means of assisting. Even in situations where voluntary activities cannot be used to remove the problems, their consequences can still be alleviated. The activities or experimentation with new methods may not, in any situation, cause damage to those targeted by the activities. Ethical principles cannot be compromised. The principles of doing good and avoiding harm must be clear in the minds of everyone when performing or planning voluntary activities.

The most significant practical difference between voluntary activities and professional work is remuneration. For many, professional work can constitute a vocation even though it is carried out in the form of entrepreneurial activities or paid work. No wages are paid for participation in voluntary activities. The activities in themselves are their own reward. Their content varies and depends largely on the person's motivation for the activities. Many compare voluntary activities to a hobby that functions to complete life but does not control it. Some can gain the principal content to their lives through voluntary activities. Many background organisations for voluntary work want to encourage and thank their volunteers by offering them the opportunity to take part in shared cultural events or similar occasions. The ambiguities in taxation related to such activities must be resolved.

Voluntary activities require a lower level of commitment than professional work. The volunteers are able to adjust and direct the activities according to their own views and life situations and, if they wish, give them up altogether. Correspondingly, the rights of volunteers to many of the indirect benefits offered by a regular job are fewer or non-existent.

In order to ensure continuity, voluntary activities also need their specific set of rules. The flexibility allowed to the person providing the help cannot mean that the clients have no certainty over whether or they will receive the help they need. The client's best interest and respect for human dignity constitute the primary objectives in help provided both through voluntary activities and professional means. Professionals in social welfare and health care services have a strict obligation to secrecy, and the same requirement also applies to voluntary work.

### **Phenomena related to voluntary activities**

The wide interest in voluntary activities indicates that they are held in high regard in society. For this reason, too, it is important that no negative traits are associated with it. At times, concerns have been expressed over the unclear boundary between professional work and voluntary activities. It has also been suspected that in an increasingly tight economy, volunteer work is substituted for professional work thus compromising the level of competence with which the tasks are performed. This is not in line with ethical principles, and obscures the significance of voluntary activities.

Such concerns can also be based on a misunderstanding and an unwillingness to adopt operating methods where professional work and voluntary activities complement one another. Change always requires learning and time, which are not always easy to arrange in the context of a busy, routine workday. When finding ways



to combine voluntary work and professional work, the directors and managers within a work community must reserve time and competent instructors for the purpose. It should be remembered that, at best, participation in the provision of care by volunteers facilitates and expedites the work of professionals. At the same time, it is possible to ensure that the patient or client has received sufficient information, is able to follow the instructions received and feels safe with both professionals and volunteers.

When assessing the coverage and opportunities of voluntary activities, it is important to recall their selective nature. The activities would seem to focus mainly on people, situations and problems that are easily attended to. This is of course not always the case: many volunteers choose to give their time to mentally and physically highly demanding tasks. For this reason, we cannot expect voluntary activities as a whole to provide the kind of coverage that is the objective of professional work.

### Positions

- Dynamic voluntary activities are in many ways a positive element of social welfare and health care services. It is important to develop new operating methods so that they encourage even broader participation in voluntary activities. The most important reward is the work itself.
- Through voluntary activities, it is possible to find new ways of resolving problem situations that cannot be tackled through professional work. Finding solutions requires an open-minded approach that focuses on opportunities and solutions rather than problems and difficulties. Efforts must be made to realise the development proposals made by volunteers themselves.
- Voluntary activities can bring more depth to a client-centred approach. Volunteers and peer helpers can convey messages that are otherwise left unheard.
- The impact and effectiveness of professional work can often be improved by incorporating the input of volunteers as a part of it. The tasks assigned to volunteers do not remove the need for professional help but complement it. The delegation of the tasks to volunteers must be carried out by the party organising the activities and at the responsibility of the said party. The organiser can also appoint a contact person for volunteers, who will then ensure the realisation of ethical principles, particularly confidentiality and the continuity of the help provided.
- All those taking part in voluntary activities must be provided with a sufficiently broad-based training in the activities and their ethical principles. People engaging in voluntary activities must be trained to encounter people in circumstances where particular sensitivity is called for.
- The compatibility of the goals, experience and history of all those taking part in the activities with the tasks assigned to them must be ensured on a case-by-case basis. It is particularly important to stress the confidential nature of the activities and the obligation to secrecy that also applies in voluntary activities.
- In the training provided, it is important to anticipate situations that require more skills and expertise than average and to agree on practices to be observed in such situations. Volunteers must be provided with guidance, support and encouragement in the form of peer support, the help of appointed professionals and work counselling. This support must be available particularly in situations where public discussion is generated regarding the activities.
- The input given by many of those participating in voluntary activities is truly significant. For this reason, it is reasonable that the travel, telephone and other costs incurred to them from the activities and the cost of recreational events they are required to attend while performing the tasks are remunerated to them where possible. Ambiguities related to taxation must be resolved. The insurances of people taking part in the activities must be handled in the appropriate manner, and grievances pertaining to insurance terms must be addressed.

