



## Voluntary Sector Policy Platform

*The Voluntary sector policy platform is the key political document for the Association of BGOs in Norway and is adopted at the general assembly every year.*

### More and better voluntary work

The purpose of this policy platform is to create a common understanding among the members of the Association of NGOs in Norway of what values volunteer work is based on, what is the role of the voluntary sector and what the key areas for the voluntary sector in Norway in the coming years will be.

### Values

Voluntary work creates change, it challenges and makes a difference. The voluntary sector impacts and changes society through its activities, initiatives and by creating stronger communities. Voluntary work changes *the people* who are involved by expanding their competence and social capital. And it changes *itself*, so that it may be better equipped to create further change.

Voluntary work in Norway is first of all diverse and unique. It is comprised of tasks, roles, functions and cultures which means that it must be met with other policy instruments than those employed for the public or private sectors. The voluntary sector is independent and should not have to rely on frameworks and legislation created for other sections of our society.

Volunteer work has an intrinsic value, and voluntary activity is of benefit in and of itself. But the roles fulfilled through voluntary work also benefit society. It is the government's responsibility to make sure voluntary activities can continue to fulfill these roles. This means that one must make sure voluntary activities are allowed to develop on their own terms, controlled by the volunteers themselves. Government policy must be appropriate to the voluntary activity that is already in place rather than to any other voluntary activity one might prefer.

### What is volunteerism?

There are many types of voluntary organizations, but they have some features in common. A voluntary organization is an association of people or activities that operate on a non-commercial and non-government basis. A voluntary activity has a non-commercial purpose, and a significant part of its activity is based on donations, membership fees, fund-raising or voluntary work and time donated. Associations of people and activities may be voluntary groups, societies, associations, networks or umbrella organizations.

A voluntary sector policy must support a voluntary sector which is

- independent and of intrinsic value
- diverse, varied and innovative
- challenging, critical and promoting development
- social and open to everyone
- unselfish and with a high ethical standard.

### **The voluntary sector assumes responsibility**

Voluntary organisations in Norway are part of a large community. On account of its intrinsic value and its many roles in our society, the voluntary sector is operating with a high moral value. Participation in this community also entails an obligation. A voluntary organisation in Norway is both a representative of the entire voluntary sector and a role model through its goals, actions, consumer choices and how it operates. The voluntary sector is accountable for how it manages its financial and human resources - accountable to its donors as well as other voluntary organisations. Therefore the members of Association of NGOs in Norway encourage each other to:

- Act in an inclusive manner, and make it easy for everyone to join regardless of their functional or cultural background.
- Work to make sure government funds and means obtained through fundraising are used efficiently and for the intended purpose.
- Facilitate transparency in one's own organisation as regards to democratic processes as well as financial transactions.
- Keep the ethical aspects in mind when purchasing goods, travel and other services, and chose those alternatives that best safeguard the climate, the environment and human rights.
- To show good will and respect to all citizens and maintaining a high ethical standard in contact with potential donors and other partners.

### **Room for civil society**

In the Norwegian well fare model participation in the workforce and in community is a means and a goal. Participation in civil society ensures a vibrant democracy, social capital, well-being and good public health.

Voluntary organizations play an important role in the Norwegian well-fare model. They promote political and social development, provide necessary community services and for many citizens organizations are the most accessible way to participate in the Norwegian democracy. Citizens engage in activities and issues that are important to them through the almost 100.000 voluntary organizations in Norway. Even though most of these do not work politically, but rather offer activities or services to members and other target groups, many of them participate in local political debates on transport and development plans, public building, conservation, cultural



heritage, etc. Voluntary organizations, associations and clubs are non-formal schools in democracy. Members and participants learn about organizational development, get leader training, and social skills and practice democracy.

Voluntary organizations are under pressure from both commercial and public sector. Businesses use the term to create loyalty among customers, and both businesses and local public authorities use the term volunteers and the Norwegian term “dugnad” to recruit to fully or partially unpaid work. Voluntary work is increasingly being equated to all good social causes.

Association of NGOs in Norway will work to encourage national and local authorities to create room for civil society through:

- developing a clear and comprehensive voluntary policy that allows the voluntary organizations to continue to be the corner stone in an active civil society also in the future.
- Recognizing in words and actions that the voluntary organizations’ contribution to a more inclusive society and more democracy cannot be replaced by neither the public or commercial sectors.
- Encouraging voluntary non-profit initiatives to increase their efforts for the various socially beneficial purposes they work for. Volunteer policy tools and support tools that have been created to strengthen voluntary organizations must be defended. Support tools that have been established for to support non-profit organizations must be reserved these organizations.

Volunteerism is community building and pioneer work

Committed volunteers are found in nearly all areas of society, working for causes, groups and interests. The work carried out by volunteers in Norway has an enormous power. Thousands of hours are spent doing unpaid work, and large sums of money in the form of donations and membership fees are channelled to causes that benefit society. This helps solve tasks which society at large would otherwise have to take on, and adds value to a number of public services. In Norway as well as abroad, our organisations provide services which would have been both more expensive and of a lower quality without the contribution of volunteers, and at the same time those involved have the pleasure of taking part in meaningful work.

Voluntary organisations are pioneers - in the past they developed a number of institutions and schemes aimed at particular purposes and groups, and later on their work has often been seen as a government responsibility and has become a part of the Norwegian welfare state model. Such voluntary efforts must be supported rather than replaced by other sectors.

**For the voluntary sector to remain in this role, we must work for:**



- Long-term, predictable and ethical framework conditions
- The organisations' right to and need for independent income generation. They must be able to have creative and ethical income-generating work, in a long-term as well as a short-term perspective
- Stable and general tax provisions rather than special arrangements, compensations and remedial schemes
- Equal treatment with the government and private enterprises as regards VAT.
- Recognition in tendering processes of the value added by voluntary work
- Government provisions for voluntary work must reflect the fact that our role as pioneers requires a long-term perspective, trying and failing
- Registration systems for information to the government must be simple, un-bureaucratic, reasonable and applicable for all organisations, whether small or large, local or national
- Both national and local authorities must understand the mechanisms of voluntary work, and demands for professionalism in an organisation must not be at the expense of its intrinsic character.

## **Volunteerism builds and safeguards democracy**

Voluntary organisations play an important part in the Nordic model of democracy. They are engines for political and social development. A vibrant democracy needs impulses from its citizens, and voluntary organisations create communication channels into a democratic government and the public sphere for interest groups and citizens who are passionate about a cause. In this way, the organisations also help their members to understand democracy and encourage them to help shape the public opinion - they are in fact democracy schools.

Voluntary work takes place between individuals and the government or the commercial sector, and this often means that voluntary organisations become the voice of groups or individuals who are unable to speak for themselves. Without voluntary organisations there is a greater risk of mistakes and even abuse committed by the state, the local government or the commercial sector. As a result, the voluntary sector also safeguards civil rights and guarantees a critical element of civil society.

Not all organisations work internationally, yet voluntary work is by its very nature international. The voluntary sector has many international functions and assumes much responsibility internationally. To strengthen the international perspective in the voluntary sector is to strengthen our entire society's international involvement. The values expressed through voluntary work in Norway form part of our international, democratic heritage. Those who participate in voluntary organisations also increase their competence, and our voluntary organisations possess considerable expertise. Several of our organisations are key experts within their field, and several have competence that is found nowhere else. Participation in international networks increases



competence and enhances the organisation's role as a community builder and a school of democracy.

For voluntary organisations to maintain this role, we must ensure:

- That it is easy to run voluntary activities, both for volunteers and for employees who organize the voluntary work of others
- That the voluntary sector has an objective and sector-wide system for financial support of operations that safeguards the character of each organisation, whether its resources are members, activities or donors
- That the organisations receive equal treatment, that the authorities have the same terms and conditions for "useful" and "critical" organisations, and that their support schemes are not biased in terms of ideology
- That the voluntary organisations need great freedom in order to manage funds in line with each organisation's own scope of work
- That the voluntary organisations must have the opportunity to accumulate and disseminate knowledge of international cooperation within all fields of voluntary work, and that international support schemes allow great freedom in project preparation
- That young people find voluntary work attractive.

### **Volunteerism creates identity, promotes good health, activity and social community**

Voluntary work creates identity, activity and a sense of community between people. Voluntary organisations have been built up for different purposes, but even though they are working for a specific purpose, all the organisations also build and maintain a community which gives each participant an identity and fellowship.

Voluntary work creates a local activity and a commitment that will enrich any local community besides being of great value for the individual involved. This leads to vibrant communities, creates venues where people can flourish and enriches people's everyday lives, whether they participate in voluntary work themselves or are recipients enjoying the benefits of other people's voluntary work. Voluntary work therefore has considerable intrinsic value, but it is also cost-saver for society in general. Voluntary work is all about participation and commitment, and that in itself promotes good health.

For voluntary organisations to maintain this role, it is necessary:

- For our voluntary organisations to encourage local authorities to have an active voluntary sector policy, based on a comprehensive and objective approach to voluntary work



- To enhance the knowledge of the voluntary sector among those working in local councils and county councils
- That the voluntary sector participates in organising local venues for individuals as well as local associations, where volunteer centres become power hubs for new as well as established voluntary work
- That a closer cooperation is established in local cultural life between our organisations and other local players
- That the voluntary sector sees the importance of promoting physical and mental health through participation in voluntary work and organisational life.

## **Volunteerism is preparedness and social capital**

Volunteerism increases the social capital of both individuals and society in general. Voluntary work creates understanding and tolerance when people meet, whether they belong to different age groups, cultures or social groups. In this way participation in voluntary organisations helps break down prejudice and creates mutual trust within a community.

Norwegian voluntary organisations act as a glue in our society. Volunteerism safeguards the individual as well as the community. However, the idea of preparedness also includes the ability to act, initiative, presence and commitment. To strengthen the voluntary sector is to strengthen society's preparedness and togetherness and to ensure democratic values, participation and identity among the citizens.

For voluntary organisations to maintain this role, it is necessary:

- That everyone is able to join the voluntary organisations, that membership criteria are transparent and not controlled by external guidelines, and that voluntary organisations are given access to and are accessible to the general public, at schools and in the local community
- That both the general society and the voluntary sector itself see it as important to protect the voluntary organisations and help them grow
- That it must be easy to donate to voluntary organisations, and that such financial support should give the donor a tax benefit.

## **Volunteerism communicates culture and knowledge**

Our cultural background is shaped by civil society. Voluntary organisations have been and continue to be bearers of a cultural and political heritage. Our organisations possess competence in a wide variety of fields, both within the particular field where they work, and general competence concerning society. Our organisations communicate knowledge and constitute a learning venue



both for those who work there and undertake courses and leadership training, and by educating the general public in various ways

For voluntary organisations to maintain this role, it is necessary:

- That the community in general receives more information about the voluntary sector's importance in Norwegian society
- That an appreciation of the voluntary sector's special nature is created both among the general public and among national and local authorities
- That the adult education associations and competence enhancement schemes in our organisations are strengthened, and that there is recognition of the voluntary sector's learning venues in society.

### **The voluntary sector is diverse, idealistic and sustainable**

A vibrant society needs a strong voluntary sector that has room for people who will use their time and resources to create a better life for themselves or others, without their own profit or gain being a main motivation.

The voluntary sector provides a variety of such venues and represents in itself a unique diversity. This diversity makes it possible to create communities based on common values and interests, where one's distinctive nature is respected, across social groups. In a multi-cultural society both these roles are important for the creation of linguistic, social and cultural ties within a society.

For voluntary organisations to maintain this role, it is necessary:

- That voluntary organisations must be developed as fellowships that welcome everyone, and that the organisations' work towards minority groups must be strengthened
- That everyone must be able to participate in voluntary organisations, even if they have a disability or chronic illness
- That all types of voluntary groups and organisations can be offered good local services, in terms of available facilities, support schemes, equipment and training.

A vibrant society needs a strong voluntary sector where people get involved and spend their time and resources for reasons other than selfish profit. Both the government and the voluntary sector itself have a responsibility to ensure that the voluntary sector continues to carry out its unique social tasks and continues to develop its activities, thereby creating added value for our society in yet more areas. However, it is up to the voluntary organisations themselves to define their area of work. Government policy must focus on voluntary activities that exist rather than on activities one might have preferred. Government policy work must be aimed at creating more and better voluntary work.



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