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What does volunteering represent for us?

Statement submitted by 7 Regional Youth Platforms and 18 International Non Governmental Youth Organisations participating to the International Coordination Meeting of Youth Organisations (ICMYO)

Young people today are engaged in volunteering through increasingly diverse ways, ranging from taking part in a single action or enrolling in a voluntary-service programme; to lifetime commitments to volunteering movements. As volunteer-based, democratic youth organisations we are committed to offering volunteering opportunities for all young people, no matter their gender, nationality or background. We aim to ensure quality programmes while remaining open to progress, to be inclusive, equal and open minded. In turn, we expect political, social and financial recognition and support from global, national and local decision-makers and from the international community including the United Nations, national governments and public authorities.

As representatives of youth organisations around the world, we are concerned that many international organisations and national governments have been putting their focus in the development of volunteering policies promoting mainly individuals' participation in what are often publicly-controlled voluntary service schemes. We acknowledge that all forms of volunteering are important, however such policies can ignore the vast majority of volunteers, engaged in volunteer-based, civil society organisations. We are convinced that voluntary-based and -led organisations offer a unique empowering environment and that every volunteer – no matter what age, gender or social background - should be given the opportunity to fully participate in the organisation s/he is volunteering within.

Concerned by and aware of the fact that many young people are deprived of their human rights and not able to have their basic needs met, we acknowledge that participating in voluntary activities remains a challenge for the majority of young people in the world, particularly girls and young women, due to financial, social and other constraints. As independent, representative and democratic youth-led organisations, we want to fight this situation where not all young people can volunteer as freely and easily as they wish. Governments, community leaders and other decision-makers need to acknowledge that for many young people, youth-led organisations are the main tool for participation in democratic decision-making processes and that they provide fundamental life skills to become responsible citizens of the world.

Volunteering not only provides young people with insight and experience in participation, democratic decision-making and active citizenship, it also delivers experience, life skills and leadership competencies through non-formal education. These skills and competencies, as well as non-formal education need to be recognised by the international community, governments, the private and public sector, educational institutions, community leaders and civil society. Volunteering in its very essence means having the choice to get engaged. We are concerned, however, about the growing trend where engagement in volunteering becomes an obligatory part in school curricula or an entrance requirement for schools and universities. While we are proud of the economical and educational benefits that volunteering brings to societies worldwide, we worry that this emphasis given to the economic side of volunteering may not only be positive as it can increase the pressure on young people - ultimately jeopardising the core meaning of volunteering.

2011 will mark the 10th anniversary of the UN Year of Volunteers. With respect to the preparations for this special event we call upon the United Nations and the Member States to step up their coordinated efforts to recognise and support all volunteering and volunteer-based, volunteer-led organisations, providing young people with safe spaces for personal growth and democratic frameworks and giving them the potential to change our world for the better.

Signatories Organisations

Regional Youth Platforms

European Youth Forum
Latin American Youth Forum
Caribbean Federation of Youth
Panafrican Youth Union
Pacific Youth Council
Asia Students Association
Asia Youth Council

International Non-Governmental Youth Organisations

International Falcon Movement
World Student Christian Federation
AIESEC International
Global Young Greens
International Federation of Medical Students' Associations
International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
International Federation of Liberal Youth
International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
International Movement of Catholic Agricultural and Rural Youth
International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCSPax Romana)
International Union of Socialist Youth
International Young Democrat Union
World Association of Girl Guides & Girl Scouts
World Organisation of the Scout Movement
World Alliance of the YMCAs
World Esperanto Youth Organisation
World Federation of Democratic Youth
World YWCA