

POLICY POSITION

INCLUSION OF SENIOR VOLUNTEERS IN CIVIL DIALOGUE



Confederation
of European
Senior Expert
Services

Summary

Inclusion of Senior volunteers in Civil Dialogue

This CESES policy paper explores the critical role of senior volunteers in fostering a more inclusive and representative policymaking process within the European Union. It highlights how EU institutions can better incorporate older citizens into civil dialogue and community engagement, as well as give reasons why organisations such as CESES should be more involved in the policymaking process. Emphasising active ageing, education and training, volunteering and human rights, the paper advocates for the inclusion of senior citizens in programmes that strengthen European cohesion and foster knowledge transfer. The paper concerns the following topics:

CESES notes that there is:

- Limited inclusion of senior volunteers in EU and non-EU programmes.
- Underutilisation of seniors in community decision-making.
- Lack of accessible education and training opportunities for seniors.
- Isolation and mental health challenges due to inadequate volunteering frameworks.
- Persistent ageism and negative stereotypes hindering seniors' involvement in policy-making.

CESES recommendations:

- Expand EU frameworks to better integrate senior volunteers, whilst also encouraging local governments to engage seniors in community decisions.
- Develop targeted education and training programs for active ageing.
- Promote volunteering opportunities tailored to seniors' skills and needs.
- Advocate for policies that combat ageism and foster senior inclusion in decision-making, with a view to promote knowledge transfer.

Policy Paper 1

Inclusion of Senior volunteers in Civil Dialogue

Introduction

The topic of senior volunteering is a poignant subject in the European Union due to its significant social, economic, and demographic implications. As Europe faces an ageing population, the contributions of senior volunteers are becoming increasingly vital. These volunteers bring a wealth of experience, knowledge, and skills that can greatly benefit various sectors, from education and healthcare to social services and community development. Moreover, senior volunteering itself promotes active ageing, which aligns with the EU's commitment to enhancing the quality of life for older adults. Active ageing policies encourage seniors to remain engaged in their communities, fostering social inclusion, reducing isolation, and improving overall well-being.

From an economic perspective, the inclusion of seniors helps alleviate the strain on public resources by providing valuable services without compensation, thereby supporting the sustainability of social welfare systems. Their involvement also supports intergenerational solidarity, as senior volunteers often mentor younger generations, facilitating the transfer of skills and fostering mutual understanding and cooperation across age groups.

Furthermore, senior volunteering is integral to the EU's broader goals of social cohesion and citizenship. By engaging older adults in meaningful activities, the EU promotes a more inclusive society where all citizens, regardless of age, can contribute to and benefit from social progress. This approach is reflected in various EU initiatives and regulations, such as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, which emphasise the importance of leveraging the potential of older adults in building a cohesive and dynamic Europe.

This policy paper presents the difficulties in integrating senior volunteering in today's European society, with an emphasis on the challenges to be overcome, as viewed by **CESES**, to create a more inclusive society for seniors.

One of the primary advantages of senior volunteers is their extensive life and work experience. Many seniors have had long careers in diverse fields such as education, healthcare, business, law, engineering, the civil service, and more. This broad range of expertise allows them to contribute meaningfully to various projects and initiatives. For instance, retired teachers can offer tutoring and educational support, retired healthcare professionals can assist in medical clinics or health education programmes, and former business executives can provide mentorship and strategic guidance to SMEs and non-profit organisations.

The exclusion of senior volunteers from societal activities has far-reaching negative consequences, including missed opportunities for knowledge transfer, increased social isolation, economic impact, dealing with ageism, intergenerational connection, and the underutilization of resources. Addressing this issue requires a concerted effort to create inclusive opportunities for seniors, recognize their contributions, and promote intergenerational collaboration. Society can in this way benefit from the valuable input of senior volunteers and ensure a more inclusive, cohesive, and vibrant community.

1. EU Institutions

The inclusion of senior volunteers in civil dialogue is essential for creating a more inclusive and representative policymaking process within the European Union. EU institutions play a pivotal role in facilitating and promoting the engagement of senior volunteers, ensuring that their voices are heard and their contributions are valued in shaping policies that affect all generations.

1.1. EU Programmes

Many different programmes provide for the inclusion of senior volunteers, the biggest of which being the **Erasmus+** programme¹, widely recognized for its support of education, training, youth and sport in Europe, offering opportunities for promoting senior volunteering through organisations like **CESES**. By fostering lifelong learning and intergenerational exchange, **Erasmus+** projects sometimes include activities that engage seniors in educational and community initiatives, such as in mentoring roles, where they share their knowledge and experience with younger participants. This intergenerational learning approach not only benefits the young but also keeps seniors actively engaged in meaningful societal roles. We would like to see more projects that focus on the inclusion of senior volunteers.

Another relevant initiative is the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (**CERV**) programme², which aims to protect and promote rights and values as enshrined in the EU treaties, including democracy, equality, and the rule of law. This programme is crucial for the support

¹ . <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/>

² . <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/cerv>

of senior volunteering as it funds projects that encourage civic engagement and participation in the democratic process. By supporting initiatives that involve senior volunteers, **CERV** helps to ensure that the voices of older citizens are heard in discussions on human rights, equality, and social justice. It promotes the active participation of seniors in community activities and policy dialogues, thereby enhancing their contributions to society and ensuring their perspectives are considered in the formulation of policies.

The European Education Area (**EEA**)³ also aims to create a seamless and inclusive educational landscape across Europe by 2025, emphasising lifelong learning and the importance of education for all ages, including senior citizens. Senior volunteering is particularly relevant in this context, as it aligns with the **EEA**'s goals of promoting active citizenship and social inclusion. However, there is a lack of focus on senior citizens in particular.

The Digital Education Action Plan (**DEAP**)⁴ is another initiative with senior citizens in mind, aimed at fostering a high-performing digital education ecosystem and enhancing digital skills and competences for all citizens, including senior volunteers. This initiative aligns closely with the objectives of promoting senior volunteering in policymaking and civil dialogue, as digital literacy is crucial for active participation in today's society.

The European Solidarity Corps (**ESC**)⁵ is mostly centred around young people, offering opportunities to volunteer or work in solidarity-related projects across Europe, but it does occasionally incorporate intergenerational projects where seniors work alongside younger volunteers. By including seniors in **ESC** projects, the programme can benefit from the wealth of experience and skills that older volunteers bring, while also providing them with opportunities to remain active and socially engaged.

Another relevant organisation is the European Economic and Social Committee (**EESC**)⁶, which has been an advocate for the recognition and promotion of the role of senior volunteers. Through its various opinions and reports, the **EESC** has highlighted the importance of active ageing and the valuable contributions that senior volunteers make to society. It supports policies and initiatives that encourage the inclusion of seniors in volunteer activities, so as to ensure that their insights and expertise are considered in shaping EU policies. Examples of relevant work include an opinion formulated with **CEV** and **CESES** "Towards a European Strategy for Older Persons", approved in July 2023⁷, as well as the EESC's own initiative opinion "Volunteers – Citizens building the future of Europe", in which the rapporteur of the opinion, Krzysztof Pater, states "The future of Europe will not be built by decision-makers, politicians or civil society organisations, but by active citizens and volunteers

3 .

<https://education.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/related-websites-and-tools/employment-volunteering-resources>

4 . <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>

5 . https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity_en

6 . <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en>

7 .

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/vers-une-strategie-europeenne-en-faveur-des-personnes-agees>

– by people who devote their free time to the benefit of society”⁸.

Although there are several programmes already involving the inclusion of senior volunteers, there are nevertheless not enough calls and grants that include the latter. Adding senior volunteers as mentors, and senior expert organisations, to follow the volunteering placements of younger people abroad would be a step in the right direction for this inclusion.

It is noted in particular that European Union support for international cooperation, both for development assistance and mutually beneficial partnerships around the world, could benefit greatly from the involvement of experienced senior volunteers. There are currently few cooperation programmes supported by the European Commission that provide opportunities for this. The European Union is the world’s largest donor of development assistance and the effectiveness of its support could be significantly enhanced if the experience and skills of senior volunteers were harnessed in the interests of the economies and populations of partner countries. Such inclusion would provide a major addition to opportunities for European seniors to make use of their abilities and to enhance societal inclusion.

1.2. Non-EU Institutions

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (**UNECE**), an organisation focused on integration and cooperation, has also made clear their position on the inclusion of active citizens in policy-making. In their 2021 paper *The meaningful participation of older persons and civil society in policy-making*, they mention the following: “[...] At the instrumental level, involving a variety of stakeholders can create greater support and buy-in for policy decisions, which can make a policy more effective and legitimate. Hearing from different voices can allow governments to tap into a wider range of sources of information, perspectives and potential solutions and can improve the quality of decisions reached. It can build trust between people and governments.”⁹

The **UN** itself also takes up the position of strengthening social inclusion and the well-being of older citizens. In their paper on *How volunteering strengthens social inclusion and well-being of senior citizens*¹⁰, they state the following: “Engaging in volunteer activities can help {senior volunteers} feel useful, productive and connected to the communities around them, increase levels of interaction and physical activity, and strengthen their sense of agency and self-esteem. This has positive effects on their wellbeing and social inclusion, directly contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 3 (health and well-being) and the principle of

⁸

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/volunteers-citizens-building-future-europe-own-initiative-opinion>

⁹

<https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/UNECE%20meaningful%20participation%20guidance%20note.pdf> (Page 5, Section 2.1, Paragraph 2)

¹⁰

<https://www.unv.org/Success-stories/how-volunteering-strengthens-social-inclusion-and-well-being>

leaving no one behind.”

1.3. Involving senior citizens

Senior volunteering is a critical issue in the EU because it addresses key challenges related to ageing, social inclusion, economic sustainability, and intergenerational solidarity. By prioritising and promoting the inclusion of these senior citizens in the decision-making process, the EU can harness the full potential of its ageing population, creating a more resilient and inclusive society for all. We advocate for this goal, and are focused on ensuring that their essential contributions continue to develop comprehensive, inclusive and effective policies that address the diverse needs of all citizens. Senior participation in programmes such as **Erasmus+**, **Horizon Europe**, or the **Digital Education Action Plan** can help improve the design and implementation of policies, fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer and enhancing economic and social cohesion. By valuing these contributions, the EU can strengthen its ability to address diverse societal needs and build a stronger, more resilient Europe.

2. Community

2.1. Team work

Non-profit organisations and community groups often heavily rely on volunteers to carry out their missions. Senior volunteers can be particularly valuable in these settings due to their reliability, commitment and expertise. Whether it's fundraising, administrative support, event planning, or direct service delivery, seniors can take on a variety of roles that support the functioning and success of these organisations. Their involvement can enhance the capacity of non-profits to serve their communities effectively. To further enhance this impact, there is a growing need for more grants supporting cross-sectoral collaboration at European, national and local levels. These grants should encourage partnerships between senior volunteers, youth, and environmental or social groups. This would create synergies between different sectors and strengthen society, while tackling critical issues like social inclusion, sustainability, and economic resilience. By providing financial backing for these collaborations, both senior and youth volunteers can work together on innovative projects that address current societal challenges.

2.2. Active Ageing

The European Union (EU) recognises the benefits of Active Ageing and has developed regulations and initiatives to encourage the latter across member states. There are several

reasons why promoting active ageing in the community is crucial - mental health, keeping physically healthy, as well as passing on expertise that would otherwise be lost. The most significant way of staying engaged in the community is through volunteering. An emphasis on community engagement, with active ageing in mind, should therefore be a priority when integrating these senior citizens.

2.3. Participation (underutilisation of resources)

Seniors represent a significant portion of the population, and their underutilisation in volunteer roles is a waste of a valuable resource. Many seniors are retired and have the time, willingness, and ability to contribute to community efforts. Not tapping into this resource means missing out on the potential for enhanced community services, improved educational outcomes, and strengthened social support systems. Maximising the involvement of senior volunteers can lead to more robust and dynamic communities.

2.4. Cross-generational (bridging generational gaps)

Senior volunteers often engage in intergenerational programmes, where they work alongside younger individuals. These interactions can help bridge generational gaps, fostering mutual understanding and respect. Younger people can benefit from the wisdom and guidance of their older counterparts, while seniors can gain new perspectives and learn about contemporary issues and technologies. This exchange of knowledge and experiences enriches both parties and strengthens community bonds.

2.5. Experience (knowledge transfer)

Senior volunteers possess decades of professional and life experience, which can be invaluable in various fields such as education, healthcare, and community development. By not including them in volunteer activities, society misses out on the opportunity to leverage this knowledge and expertise. Senior volunteers can mentor younger generations, provide professional advice, and contribute to strategic planning and decision-making processes in organisations. The absence of their input can lead to a lack of depth and perspective in these areas, ultimately affecting the quality and effectiveness of community programs.

3. Education and training

Education and training for senior citizens are crucial components in promoting active ageing, social inclusion, and lifelong learning. In the context of EU regulations and initiatives, several frameworks and programs support these goals, emphasising the importance of keeping older adults engaged, skilled, and integrated into society.

3.1. EU programmes supporting senior education and training

The European Union offers various programmes to enhance the education and training of senior citizens, thereby fostering their active participation in society and promoting European

cohesion. The **Erasmus+** programme supports the professional development of adult education staff and enhances adult education systems across Europe, including projects that boost the skills and competencies of older adults. Additionally, it offers learning mobility opportunities, enabling seniors to gain new skills and knowledge in different European countries, facilitating valuable knowledge transfer and mentoring. The European Social Fund (**ESF**) complements these efforts by funding initiatives that promote employment, social inclusion, and education, specifically targeting the improvement of older adults' skills and employability through training and lifelong learning programmes. Furthermore, the Digital Education Action Plan (**DEAP**) highlights the importance of digital literacy for all citizens, including seniors, by providing guidelines and funding to support the development of digital skills. Together, these programs highlight a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning, mentoring, and digital inclusion, ensuring seniors are well-equipped to contribute to and benefit from the evolving educational and social landscapes in Europe.

3.2. Other senior education programmes and incentives

Many European countries have established senior universities or similar institutions dedicated to providing educational opportunities for older adults. These institutions offer a wide range of courses, from language and computer skills to arts and humanities, tailored to the interests and needs of seniors.

Various NGOs and community organisations, often supported by EU funding, such as CESES, also organise workshops and training sessions specifically designed for older adults. These sessions cover topics such as digital skills, financial literacy, health education, and active citizenship.

A great example of the value of senior citizens, in terms of their experience and voice, is the VerA Initiative by our member organisation **SES** in Germany. Winner of the SENT 2023 Awards for the “Organisation with Best Mentoring and Support to Young People”, the programme aims to help younger people in difficult situations who are at risk of dropping out, pairing them with senior experts to help mentor and guide them to economic and social independence¹¹.

3.3. Impact and future directions

Education and training initiatives for senior citizens help combat social isolation and promote active participation in community life. They enable seniors to stay connected, engaged, and valued in society. By acquiring new skills and knowledge, older adults can enhance their employability and extend their working lives. This contributes to economic growth and reduces the financial burden on social security systems. Promoting lifelong learning among seniors also fosters a culture of continuous personal and professional development. It encourages people of all ages to view learning as a lifelong pursuit, beneficial for both personal fulfilment and societal progress.

¹¹ . https://vera.ses-bonn.de/fileadmin/user_upload/VerA_Infoblatt_2022_EN.pdf

4. Volunteering

At **CESES**, we firmly believe in the immense value that senior volunteers can bring to policymaking and civil dialogue. The wealth of experience and knowledge they possess, accumulated over years of professional and personal endeavours, is a significant asset that should be leveraged to benefit society. Including senior volunteers in these processes ensures that their insights and expertise contribute to the development of more informed and effective policies.

4.1 Social engagement

Volunteering provides seniors with an opportunity to stay socially active and connected with their communities. This social engagement is crucial for mental and emotional well-being, helping to combat loneliness and isolation, which are common issues among the elderly. By participating in volunteer activities, seniors can build new relationships, foster a sense of purpose, and stay mentally stimulated. These social interactions can lead to improved overall health and a higher quality of life. It is necessary for seniors to engage directly with their communities at the local level, as their expertise in various roles such as mentoring, event planning, or administrative support can ensure their knowledge is not lost and instead passed on through intergenerational cooperation. This local involvement would help strengthen social bonds. They can also contribute to broader initiatives on a national level, supporting causes that align with their skills and interests, thereby playing a crucial role in the success of non-profits organisations and policies across the country. This active participation will be paramount to strengthening community cohesion and integration.

4.2 Promoting Active Ageing - Volunteering is an excellent way for seniors to stay active and engaged. Physical activity, mental stimulation, and social interaction are key components of healthy ageing. By volunteering, seniors can maintain a sense of purpose and accomplishment, which is vital for their psychological well-being. Moreover, staying active through volunteer work can help seniors remain physically healthy and delay the onset of age-related health issues.

5. Policy and Advocacy

Senior volunteering is a critical issue in the EU because it addresses key challenges related to ageing, social inclusion, economic sustainability, and intergenerational solidarity. By prioritising and promoting the inclusion of these senior citizens in the decision-making process, the EU can harness the full potential of its ageing population, creating a more resilient and inclusive society for all. We advocate for this goal, and are focused on ensuring that their essential contributions continue to develop comprehensive, inclusive and effective policies that address the diverse needs of all citizens. Senior participation in programmes such as **Erasmus+**, **Horizon Europe**, or the **Digital Education Action Plan** can help improve the design and implementation of policies, fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer and enhancing economic and social cohesion. By valuing these contributions, the EU can

strengthen its ability to address diverse societal needs and build a stronger, more resilient Europe.

5.1 Policies and frameworks

European Pillar of Social Rights - There are two principles that particularly relate to our paper here: Principle 1 - This principle emphasises the right to quality and inclusive education, training, and life-long learning for everyone. It underscores the importance of access to education and training throughout life, which includes opportunities for senior citizens; Principle 17 - Focuses on the inclusion of older adults, ensuring they can participate in society and the labour market, thereby supporting their continued education and training.

Europe 2020 Strategy - This strategy aims to promote smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth. One of its targets is to improve the education levels of all age groups, recognizing lifelong learning as a key component. It encourages member states to adopt policies that support ongoing education and training, including for senior citizens.

Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways (2016) - The recommendation calls for providing individuals with opportunities to acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, as well as a broader set of skills, knowledge, and competences. It particularly highlights the need for flexible learning pathways for adults, including older adults, to enhance their employability and social inclusion.

5.2 Senior inclusion

Policy Formulation and Advocacy: Seniors can influence policy formulation by participating in advisory councils, public consultations, and focus groups at the European level. Their firsthand experiences and expertise can shape policies related to ageing, healthcare, and social security.

Representation in Decision-Making Bodies: Seniors can be elected or appointed to European institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee, and other advisory bodies. Their presence ensures that the interests of older adults are represented in legislative processes.

Grassroots Mobilisation: Seniors often engage in grassroots movements and civil society organisations that advocate for senior rights and welfare. Their collective voice can drive European policymakers to address issues like age discrimination, retirement benefits, and eldercare services.

Knowledge Transfer and Mentorship: Senior citizens can serve as mentors and advisors to younger policymakers and activists, facilitating the transfer of knowledge and best practices. Their guidance can enhance the effectiveness of policy initiatives and ensure continuity in addressing long-term societal challenges.

Research and Innovation: Seniors can contribute to research initiatives focused on ageing and eldercare. By participating in European research projects, they can help identify innovative solutions and technologies that improve the lives of older adults, influencing policy through evidence-based findings.

Economic Impact - The economic contributions of senior volunteers are often underestimated. By not including them, communities miss out on the economic value they bring through unpaid work. Senior volunteers often support local nonprofits, schools, and healthcare facilities, reducing the need for paid staff and lowering operational costs. Their exclusion can lead to increased financial strain on these organisations, potentially reducing the scope and quality of services provided to the community.

Economic Contributions - While the work of senior volunteers is often unpaid, the economic value of their contributions should not be underestimated. The skills and services they provide would otherwise require significant financial resources to obtain. By volunteering, seniors help to reduce the financial burden on community services and organisations, enabling these entities to allocate resources more effectively. This economic contribution, while not directly measurable in monetary terms, has a substantial impact on the sustainability and reach of many programs.

In conclusion, the inclusion of senior citizens in civil dialogue is vital for creating a balanced and inclusive society. Their participation not only enriches the dialogue but also ensures that policies are comprehensive and reflective of all age groups. At the European level, seniors can significantly impact policy through advocacy, representation, mentorship, and research, thereby shaping a more age-friendly and fair Europe.

6. Human Rights (social inclusion, solidarity, equality, ageism, cultural integration)

6.1. Equality & Solidarity (social isolation and mental health issues)

Excluding seniors from volunteering and other societal activities can lead to social isolation, which is a significant risk factor for mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Volunteering provides a sense of purpose, community connection, and social interaction, which are crucial for the mental well-being of seniors. When seniors are not included, they are deprived of these benefits, leading to feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. Ensuring that seniors have opportunities to engage in meaningful activities can enhance their mental health and overall quality of life.

6.2. Social inclusion & Ageism (reinforcing ageism and negative stereotypes)

Excluding seniors from volunteering reinforces ageist stereotypes that portray older adults as less capable or irrelevant. This perpetuates a cycle of discrimination and undervaluation of the elderly population. Ageism not only harms seniors but also deprives society of the diverse perspectives and experiences that seniors can offer. Promoting the inclusion of senior

volunteers helps challenge these stereotypes and fosters a more inclusive and respectful society

6.3 Cultural integration

Cultural integration plays a crucial role in the broader agenda of human rights, particularly in fostering social inclusion, solidarity, and equality across diverse communities. By promoting cultural integration, society can break down barriers of ageism and create a space where seniors can contribute their rich experiences while engaging with younger generations and other cultures. Programmes like the CERV¹² (Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values) programme actively support projects that promote equality and human rights, including the fight against age-based discrimination. By involving seniors in cultural initiatives, these programmes not only ensure that older adults contribute to community life but also reinforce intergenerational solidarity, creating a shared sense of purpose across diverse groups.

¹² <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/cerv>