

## **‘Volontariat,’ Unis-Cité and the Prospect of National Youth Service in France**

*Note: In France, the terms “volontariat” and “volontaire” generally refer to more structured forms of voluntary service that involve specific, longer-term time frames of activity, living allowances, and/or other benefits during the period of service. “Volontariat” is to be distinguished from “benevolat,” another commonly used term that describes volunteering but pertains specifically to those activities that are unaccompanied by any financial remuneration or government policy.*

*The translation of “volontaire” into “volunteer” is therefore not entirely accurate, as the English term is less specific. In light of the fact that there is ongoing debate about whether the notions of volunteering and getting paid are at all compatible, readers should keep in mind that for the purposes of this article, the translated word “volunteer” refers to a distinct form of service that may encompass financial remuneration.*

### **Legislation on ‘volontariat’ prior to 2000**

The French government created two official schemes for volunteers, the Volunteers for International Solidarity (les Volontaires pour la Solidarité Internationale) and the Volunteer Firefighters (les sapeurs-pompiers volontaires), in 1995 and 1996, respectively.

Under the 1995 decree, any national of France or European Union Member State who is over 18 may work as a legally recognized volunteer with an international- solidarity-focused organization that has been approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The respected humanitarian society Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières is an example of such an organization.<sup>1</sup> Volunteers serve a period ranging from 1 to 6 years for which they receive a stipend, free room and board, complete insurance coverage, and special support for reintegration into French society upon return from their missions.<sup>2</sup> The law of 1996 regarding volunteer firefighters allows for participants to receive financial compensation for time spent on missions and trainings. Volunteering is restricted to a part-time basis and is primarily meant to ensure adequate service to rural areas in France.<sup>3</sup>

### **Another addition to the legal framework: ‘Volontariat Civil’**

In 1996, France ended its military service requirement for young men, leading the French government to recommend the creation of an alternative civil service. A bill proposing the establishment of a national ‘*Volontariat Civil*,’ or Voluntary Civil Service, finally passed into law in March 2000, allowing young men and women of ages 18 to 28 to volunteer full-time in one of the three following areas:

- civil defense and security;

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<sup>1</sup> For a listing of organizations that operate under the framework of Volunteers for International Solidarity, visit [http://www.reseaux-volontaires.org/partir\\_juridique.htm](http://www.reseaux-volontaires.org/partir_juridique.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Décret n° 95-94 du 30 janvier 1995, Décret relatif aux volontaires et aux associations de volontariat pour la solidarité internationale. See the legislation at <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr>

<sup>3</sup> Loi n° 96-370 du 3 mai 1996, Loi relative au développement du volontariat dans les corps de sapeurs-pompiers

- international cooperation and humanitarian aid; and
- social cohesion and solidarity.<sup>4</sup>

Under the Voluntary Civil Service, many qualified individuals have joined local fire departments as civil defense and security volunteers, but unlike regular volunteer firefighters, their service is full-time and lasts from 6 to 24 months. Youth involved in the area of international and humanitarian aid are sent overseas to French businesses, embassies and consulates for a similar time period during which they gain professional and international work experience. Although it lauds its participants for serving France overseas, this second program in particular has been criticized by some people as being hardly more than a paid professional training program for youth.

Of the three areas, that of social cohesion and solidarity conforms most closely to conventional notions of volunteer work and community service. It is the only program that calls for significant involvement of non-profit organizations in France. It is also the only program that that accepts volunteers regardless of formal and other qualifications. Whereas the other two civil service programs enlist volunteers for 6 to 24 months, the social cohesion and solidarity program offers more flexible periods of engagement for young people. The social cohesion and solidarity program was the last of the three programs to become operational, with the official registration of the non-profit organization Unis-Cité in 2003.

### **Unis-Cité and its promotion of national youth service**

The premier non-profit organization in France for structured, longer-term volunteering by youth is Unis-Cité (established in 1994), which in recent years has received increasing amounts of government funding as an experimental prototype for national youth service inside France.

The program operates by dispatching volunteers of ages 18 to 25 to service organizations in major cities in France for a six to nine-month period of organized community service and personal development. Volunteers work on several projects during their term and receive from Unis-Cité a monthly stipend of 382 Euros and coverage of transportation.

Unis-Cité was the first organization in the country to apply for a legal status of its volunteers under the social cohesion and solidarity program of the Voluntary Civil Service. For years, Unis-Cité had been at the forefront of lobbying the French government for the creation of a youth service policy and the legal recognition of volunteers. The establishment of the Voluntary Civil Service seemed for a moment to be the long-awaited product of its efforts.

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<sup>4</sup> Loi n° 2000-242 du 14 mars 2000, Loi relative aux volontariats civils institués par l'article L. 111-2 du code du service national et à diverses mesures relatives à la réforme du service national

To the dismay of Unis-Cité and other national youth service advocates, however, adequate financial resources and a clear organizational framework have been slow to accompany the legislation. The problem of financing the social cohesion and solidarity program threatens to block the development of a true, far-reaching national youth service. Under the Voluntary Civil Service Law, volunteers in all three areas are entitled to an untaxed fixed monthly stipend in addition to allowances for room and board, transportation, and other costs necessary for their work. Unis-Cité has over the years grown into a comparatively well-funded initiative that can accommodate civil volunteers; however, many other non-profit organizations in France find the cost of hosting civil volunteers too high without subsidization by the State. Because local organizations have not been unified under the Voluntary Civil Service due to financial barriers and the lack of a governmental strategy that will help them gain the new legal status, local organizations still work together on a limited basis.

In response to the unsatisfactory outcome of the Voluntary Civil Service Law, Unis-Cité simultaneously encourages other organizations to assume legal status under the social cohesion and solidarity program and continues to lobby for the development of a fully operational, sustainable, and better-funded youth service policy that will network local companies, governments and non-profits. Furthermore, Unis-Cité wishes to engage even non-French and non-EU Nationals as volunteers, as these groups are excluded under the Voluntary Civil Service framework.

*For more information on Unis-Cité, visit <http://www.unis-cite.org>.*

*For more detailed information on French legislation regarding 'volontariat,' see the Association of Voluntary Service Organizations' (AVSO) country report on France, accessible at [http://www.cev.be/legal\\_status\\_countryreports.htm](http://www.cev.be/legal_status_countryreports.htm).*