

Voluntary work and participation in Eeklo

Dear members of this International Reunion,

A few weeks ago, I was asked to prepare something about the voluntary work in Eeklo. To be honest, in preparing this text, I learned a lot about this theme, although I'm active as a volunteer myself.

And because the information I found in different publications tells a lot about voluntary work in Flanders and the evolution in the last decades, I would like – today – to share it with you.

The most recent survey on this theme was done in May of this year. The Flemish Government asked one of our Universities to verify the hypothesis that we suffer from increasing individualism and an increasing lack of commitment in our society. To verify this, the authors of the survey compared data from 1981 until 2009. And they found interesting things ...

First some figures:

- More than 50% of the people between 18- and 75 year is an active member of at least one organisation
- 22% is an active member of at least 2 organisations
- Besides this, the survey found an interesting trend: in 1981 21% of the people declared that they did voluntary work, in 1990 this figure raised up to 28% and in 2000 it was even increased up to 36%. So, looking at these figures, Flanders has no reason to worry. There is even an increasing trend over the last 30 years.

But – besides these figures - I read other interesting things about participation and the impact of voluntary work on society and someone's personal life. I give you four of the most important conclusions:

1. People who participate in organisations are more tolerant, more ethnocentric and have less anti-political opinions.
2. People who participate in voluntary organisations, integrate and participate more in their immediate neighbourhood and they communicate more with their neighbours.
3. Even for the professors who did the survey, the third conclusion was surprising: volunteers are happier in their personal life and are feeling better.
4. And last but not least, the survey delivered proof that all the positive effects on someone don't decrease when people are getting older, even if people stop their voluntary work. So, young people who participate actively benefit their whole life from the positive effects.

Reading these conclusions, I think that the reason why the Flemish Government is now investing a lot in getting people – also young people – engaged in organisations and voluntary work is clear. The positive effects on society and personal life are tremendously important.

That's why Eeklo is also investing in voluntary work and in the participation of people. These efforts are successful: today we have more than 60 socio-cultural organisations like theatre and music organisations, more than 70 sport clubs of all kinds of sports, advisory boards for the city of Eeklo, a lot of youth movements, and so on ... But there's more. In different kinds of – what we can call – professional organisations like elderly homes, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, churches, charity organisations, ... the volunteers are really important. They do things for what the professional circuit has no money or no available time. But without these volunteers, it would be impossible for these organisations to deliver the same quality or added value for our society.

So, if Eeklo is stimulating and supporting all these organisations – also the Twinning Committee – it is because the Town Council believes in the positive effects on our society and our personal life.