



# POLICY SUBMISSION

## **Volunteering to Tackle Poverty: Submission to the National Committee on Volunteering**

**November 2001**

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## **Summary of Recommendations**

The Combat Poverty Agency welcomes the attention that the United Nations Year of Volunteers, 2001 has given to the voluntary action of people all over the world and in particular the role of the Irish National Committee on Volunteering in highlighting the richness and diversity of volunteering in Ireland.

In particular, the Agency would like to highlight that valuable contribution of volunteers to tackling poverty and its root causes. However there is scope for increased support from the State and increased co-operation between the State and the Community and Voluntary sector in fostering and supporting anti-poverty voluntary action, particular among those most affected by poverty and social exclusion.

Thus the Agency recommends that:

### **The State**

- Develops, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector, a policy frame-work for volunteering with an anti-poverty dimension and an infra-structure that supports volunteering.
- Includes, as part of the development of any infrastructure to support volunteering, provision for accessible and affordable childcare, social-care and transport.
- Develops and implements a strategy to promote awareness among people receiving unemployment payments, particularly those vulnerable to exclusion and disadvantage, that they can become actively involved in and benefit from voluntary work, and still retain their payments.
- Provides adequate core funding on a multi-annual basis for community and voluntary organisations, especially those concerned with tackling poverty. This funding should take into account the resources needed to provide training and support to volunteers.
- Continues to enhance its relations with the community and voluntary sector in the realisation of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- Provides adequate resources to support voluntary action by emerging or new groups, which have a poverty-focus, particularly groups such as refugees and asylum seekers.
- Develops, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector, a system of recognition and accreditation of non-formal education and learning attained through volunteering.
- Recognises, as part of the life-long learning process, the complementarity of learning attained through the non-formal, formal education and training sectors.
- Develops, under the auspices of the National Committee on Volunteering, a national charter of rights of volunteers.
- Continues to promote and support European Union programmes such as PEACE II as a means to build peaceful inclusive communities in Ireland.
- Continues to promote and support European Voluntary Service and develop more targeted measures and systems of support to enable disadvantaged young people to avail of such programmes.

**Community and Voluntary sector**

- Are actively encouraged and supported to ensure that the training and support offered to volunteers is both appropriate and applicable to their needs, and in particular the needs of disadvantaged or socially excluded people.

**Employers and Trade Unions**

- Are actively encouraged to recognise the value of volunteering, especially in the geographical community where the business, enterprise or service is located. This could be promoted through the social partnership process.

**Volunteer Centres**

- Seek the development of a national network of volunteer centres. The potential for the establishment of such a vehicle would be strengthened and enhanced if it took place nation-wide, particularly in light of the reform of local government.
- Be actively encouraged and supported by the State to undertake specific programmes that encourage volunteering among groups which are marginalised or socially excluded.
- Engage with actors involved in the extension of NAPS to local level, in particular community fora at county level, with adequate support from the State.

## 1. Introduction

The Combat Poverty Agency is a statutory agency with responsibility for policy advice to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs and to wider government on all aspects of social and economic planning in relation to poverty.

The Agency's key functions include this policy advice role, as well as raising public awareness about poverty, conducting and commissioning research and supporting innovative anti-poverty projects.

The Agency is making this submission in the context of its role in providing support for and encouraging innovation within the community and voluntary sector in tackling poverty. It considers voluntary action as central to the sector's work. Therefore the focus of this submission is on voluntary activity within an anti-poverty organisational setting, while recognising and supporting the important contribution of volunteering outside this setting.

The Agency supports and encourages the empowerment of people who are disadvantaged or excluded, so that they can be part of designing the ways and means to overcome their own disadvantage. However within disadvantaged communities, many volunteers have had little access to resources and many experience a range of difficulties and barriers to participate in such activities.

As volunteers play an important role in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, the Agency believes the State has a role in supporting and fostering volunteering, in listening and responding to the needs of volunteers and community and voluntary organisations, and in using the experience of the sector to inform government policy.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The role and value of volunteering in society

Volunteering is dynamic. Its definition varies over time and among and within cultures. Despite its many guises, there are three core elements that can be attributed to voluntary activity in its many forms. First, it is not undertaken for financial gain. Second, it is carried out freely and without compulsion. Third, it benefits both the volunteer and the person or party whom their action is meant to aid. By emphasising exchange and reciprocity, this last point challenges the traditional stereotype of volunteering as charity.<sup>2</sup>

Volunteering plays a vital role in preserving the stability and cohesion of societies and makes a significant economic contribution. The Board of Directors of the International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE) offer an all encompassing definition: *volunteering - either through individual or group action - is a way in which: human values of community, caring, and serving can be sustained and strengthened; individuals can exercise their rights and responsibilities as members of communities while learning and growing throughout their lives, realising their full human potential;*

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<sup>1</sup> Combat Poverty Agency, (1999) *Strengthening Partnership and Participation*, its submission to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs on *Supporting Voluntary Activity: A Green Paper on the Community and Voluntary Sector and its relationships with the State*', Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Commission for Social Development, (2001) *The Role of Volunteerism in the Promotion of Social Development*: Report of Panel Discussion, United Nations Publication.

*sustainable communities, working together to provide innovative solutions to our shared challenges and to shape our collective destinies.*<sup>3</sup>

Volunteering also helps to widen social, economic and cultural networks, enhances self-esteem, meets the needs of people to learn from each other, facilitates acquisition of skills and experience thus widening employment options and builds up reserves of goodwill that can be drawn upon when needed.

It is possible to identify at least four different types of organisational settings for volunteering: mutual aid or self-help; service to others; participation; and advocacy or campaigning. Each of these settings can be found in all parts of the world, though the form each takes and the balance or mix among them differ markedly according to economic, social, political and cultural situations. These organisational settings are not mutually exclusive. Volunteers who engage in mutual aid may also be involved in participatory movements and may benefit others apart from members of their own group. Similarly volunteers involved with service delivery agencies may be involved in advocacy and campaigning.<sup>4</sup>

The active involvement of people on a voluntary basis in any variety of groups or organisations is an essential component of a democratic society. They are intermediary bodies between individuals, which counteract the processes of fragmentation and individualisation in modern society.<sup>5</sup> Voluntary organisations can be seen as politically integrating forces: as intermediary organisations between the individual/groups of individuals and the State.<sup>6</sup> Such organisations have both external and internal roles which contribute to strengthening democracy. The external effects are related to the role of association in the process of articulating their interests and affecting change. The internal effects are related to the impact or influence on members of organisations. These influences can be attached on the one hand to mobilisation (development of collective resources and political participation) and on the other to democratic socialisation (voluntary organisations create habits of co-operation among their members, a sense of concern for public affairs and a sense of mutual respect and acceptance).<sup>7</sup> The internal effects also relate to the personal confidence and life skills gained, often as a result of the non-formal educational approach of voluntary organisations. However, the possibilities for voluntary organisations to act as carriers of these democratic values become problematic if they function as professional enterprises rather than membership-based organisations.<sup>8</sup>

The value and importance of active citizenship and volunteering has increasingly received more recognition and status at different political levels. The decision taken by the General Assembly of the United Nations in its resolution 52/17 to proclaim 2001 the International Year of Volunteers has done much to focus the attention of the

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<sup>3</sup> Board of Directors of the International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE), (2001) *Universal Declaration on Volunteering*, The Netherlands, [http://www.iyv2001.org/infobase/iyvdocs/01\\_01\\_18INT\\_vol\\_declaration.htm](http://www.iyv2001.org/infobase/iyvdocs/01_01_18INT_vol_declaration.htm)

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Commission for Social Development, *The Role of Volunteerism in the Promotion of Social Development*: Report of Panel Discussion, . <http://www.iyv2001.org/iyv-eng/policy/unitednations/>

<sup>5</sup> Dahl, R. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1971, and Fukuyama, F. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*(1995) in Powell, F. and Guerin, D. (1997) *Civil Society and Social Policy*, A & A Farmar, Dublin.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Putnam, R. (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princetown University Press, Princetown.

<sup>8</sup> Powell, F. and Guerin, D. (1997) *Civil Society and Social Policy*, A & A Farmar, Dublin.

international community on volunteering.<sup>9</sup> The responsibility for governments to develop comprehensive strategies and programmes to support volunteering is explicitly recognised for the first time in the outcome document of the 24<sup>th</sup> Special Session of the General Assembly, entitled "World Summit for Social Development and Beyond: achieving social development for all in a globalizing world".<sup>10</sup>

In a European context, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on the member states of the Council of Europe to adopt and promote dynamic policies favouring voluntary action, and to seek to identify and eliminate, in their laws and practice, any obstacles which directly or indirectly prevent people from engaging in voluntary action.<sup>11</sup> At the first EU Social Policy Forum in March 1996 the need to mobilise people was stressed by the then EU President Jacques Santer: 'Dialogue is essential and nothing can be done without grassroots involvement. We must set out on the road towards a more active, participatory society'.<sup>12</sup> The need for deeper consultation with citizens was further emphasised in the European Commission's White Paper on Governance in the European Union<sup>13</sup>, which is currently open to public debate. It proposes opening up the policy-making process by involving more people and more organisations in shaping and delivering EU policy. The European Commission also requests member states to consult widely with civil society and other actors.

In Ireland the publication 1997 of *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, the Green Paper on the Voluntary and Community Sector and its Relationship with the State, situated Ireland within the European social market model that favours partnership between the voluntary sector and the State.<sup>14</sup> It explicitly equated civil society and active citizenship with the voluntary sector. *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, the White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector published in 2000 (hereafter referred to as the 'White Paper') consolidated this position. Taoiseach Bertie Ahern T.D stated in the foreword to the 'White Paper' that 'voluntary activity forms the core of all vibrant and inclusive societies....Particularly in a time of great change in our country, we must work hard to protect and enhance the spirit of voluntary participation and we must see this as a key social goal.'

### **3. The role and value of volunteering in tackling poverty and social exclusion**

The United Nations strongly acknowledges volunteerism as an important component of any strategy, aimed at poverty reduction, sustainable development and social

<sup>9</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 24<sup>th</sup> Session, Resolution 52/17 of the 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 1997, proclaiming 2001 the International Year of Volunteers, United Nations Publication.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations General Assembly Special Session, *World Summit for Social Development and Beyond: Achieving Social Development for all in a Globalising World* :S-24/2 [http://www.iyv2001.org/iyv\\_eng/policy/unitednations/unlegislation/o.../outcomedocument.htm](http://www.iyv2001.org/iyv_eng/policy/unitednations/unlegislation/o.../outcomedocument.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's recommendation 1496 (2001), *Improving the status and role of volunteers in society: a contribution by the Parliamentary Assembly to the International Year of Volunteers 2001*. <http://stars.coe.fr/ta/ta01/EREC1496.HTM>

<sup>12</sup> European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, (1998) *Active Citizenship and Community Involvement, Getting to the Roots*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, (2001) *Enhancing Democracy: the White Paper on Governance in the European Union*, European Commission <http://europa.eu.int/comm/governance/>

<sup>14</sup> Powell, F. and Guerin, D. (1997) *Civil Society and Social Policy*, A & A Farman, Dublin.

integration, and in particular overcoming social exclusion and discrimination.<sup>15</sup> The Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan also calls on all governments and the international community to play their role in dispelling the image of passivity and helplessness often ascribed to the poor. Self-help and mutual aid have always been central features of survival strategies of poor people to withstand the shocks to which they are exposed. According to the United Nations Development Fund Programme (UNDP) Poverty Report 2000, "the foundation of poverty reduction is self-organisation of the poor at community level - the best antidote to powerlessness, a central source of poverty." While highlighting the importance of self-organisation, nevertheless such efforts are often not sufficiently resourced or are too small scale to make significant inroads into helping poor people overcome poverty in a sustainable way.<sup>16</sup> The report of the Secretary General stresses the point that any government or United Nations initiatives should build on the creativity and knowledge of people affected by poverty, and should facilitate their involvement at every stage.

The importance of voluntary action in overcoming disadvantage and exclusion are also recognised by both the Council of Europe, through its Human Dignity and Social Exclusion initiative and the European Union through its Social Policy Forum, and its anti-poverty programmes, particularly the 3<sup>rd</sup> European Anti-Poverty programme, that had participation as one of its core principles. Currently, the European Commission's European Voluntary Service programme is an example of a practical programme, which supports young people to volunteer and be active citizens in Europe. It specifically targets young people who are disadvantaged.

Volunteering is positively identified as a means of overcoming social inclusion in the UK, in the 1991 and 1997 National Surveys of Volunteering.<sup>17</sup> These surveys identified a strong link between residents of a locality being involved in formal volunteering and having a positive attitude towards the local area as a place to live. Even in cases where an area is relatively deprived e.g. high unemployment, environmental degradation, poor housing, health, education or recreational facilities, high levels of crime or vandalism; community and voluntary activity can provide active help and self-help to overcome these problems. People who actively create or become part of volunteer or community activity, even if unemployed, disabled, retired or otherwise excluded can have the ability to include themselves or others in their local community.

From a poverty perspective in Ireland, support for and the involvement of the community and voluntary sector in the development and implementation of policies that aim to tackle poverty and social inclusion is fundamental.<sup>18</sup> The 'White Paper' acknowledges the importance of having a system of consultation with excluded people and their organisations in the development and implementation of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS). It also stresses the importance of developing guidelines for the involvement of excluded people and the organisations which represent them in the development, implementation and evaluation of social inclusion and anti-poverty strategies in the proposed future NAPS developments.

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<sup>15</sup> United Nations Commission on Social Development (2001) resolution 39/2 entitled *Volunteering and social development*, E/2001/26, para. 5., United Nations Publications.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations General Assembly, 56<sup>th</sup> session, (2001) *Support for volunteering*, Report of the Secretary General, United Nations Publication.

<sup>17</sup> National Centre for Volunteering, (1998) *Volunteering, a key indicator of social inclusion: Policy Briefing*, <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/volunteering/brief2.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Combat Poverty Agency (1998), *Models of consultation and ongoing participation between the statutory sector and the community and voluntary sector to inform the implementation of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS)*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

The Department of Social, Community and Family affairs incentive that facilitates unemployed people to take up voluntary work with a recognised voluntary organisation or group and continue to receive unemployment benefit should be acknowledged.<sup>19</sup> Increased efforts are needed to promote the scheme and raise awareness of the benefits of engaging in voluntary work.

There are increasing examples of people who are disadvantaged or socially excluded taking initiatives and having a more active involvement in shaping their own destiny and community. The Agency welcomes and supports the growth in such initiatives including the actions of the government, the community and voluntary sector, and the national anti-poverty networks programme<sup>20</sup> which have contributed to increased levels of empowerment in disadvantaged communities.

The community and voluntary organisations concerned with poverty have increased their capacity and diversity due to increased and more sustained support, for the most part from the State. Volunteers have made a central contribution to community and voluntary sector efforts to tackle poverty and social exclusion including<sup>21</sup>:

- working for social change in favour of people living in poverty;
- empowering those who are excluded;
- working in solidarity with those experiencing injustice and prejudice and promoting anti-discrimination policy and practice;
- ensuring that the interests and concerns of disadvantaged people and groups are prioritised in decision-making arenas;
- ensuring that those experiencing poverty and exclusion are actively involved in the policy making process; and
- providing services in a way which both meets the needs of and empowers service users and which reaches the most excluded, isolated and marginalised groups and individuals.

The National Anti-Poverty Networks also have increased their potential to influence policy. They resource and support their voluntary members in undertaking anti-poverty work, fostering their involvement on local, regional and national policy making bodies, thus ensuring a linkage between the local experience and policy-making.

In order to promote increased volunteering, the recent establishment of a number of volunteer centres is very welcome. Such centres have a role to play in providing an environment in which small voluntary groups can flourish by providing a range of physical, administrative, operational and strategic supports and services. These centres can have a key role in encouraging the sustained development of voluntary groups working against poverty and to undertake specific programmes that encourage volunteering among groups which are marginalised or socially excluded.

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<sup>19</sup> Department of Social, Family and Community Affairs, (2001) *Guide to Social Welfare Services*, Information Service, Department of Social, Family and Community Affairs.

<sup>20</sup> The National Anti-Poverty Networks Programme is a Combat Poverty Agency programme supporting the development of National Anti-Poverty Networks (currently 10) as vehicles for those involved to influence policy.

<sup>21</sup> Combat Poverty Agency, (1999) *Strengthening Partnership and Participation*: Submission to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs on *Supporting Voluntary Activity: A Green Paper on the Community and Voluntary Sector and its relationships with the State*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.



The 'White Paper' acknowledges in a positive way the diversity of roles and the increased demands on community and voluntary organisations. It states the commitment of the government 'to continued support for the sector in meeting those needs and, indeed to the development of that support as resources allow...including funding to enhance the capacity of the sector to organise itself at national level, to foster the development of additional support and training within the sector and to further support volunteering.'

While there is a policy commitment and progress has been made to create opportunities for people who are excluded to be more active in their communities, adequate resources must be provided and specific programmes developed and sustained, as many volunteers or would-be volunteers have had little access to resources and many experience a range of difficulties and barriers to be able to participate. Also, as the voluntary sector increases its capacity to take on a diversity of roles, the sector should never be regarded as a low cost substitute for service provision by the State.

The link between building peace, reconciliation and a more socially inclusive and participatory democracy on the island of Ireland should be acknowledged and actively promoted and supported.<sup>22</sup> The European Commission's Peace II programme encourages and supports projects carried out through voluntary action in building inclusive communities and increased cross-border co-operation<sup>23</sup>.

#### **4. Challenges and Threats to Volunteering**

The positive impact of a stronger community and voluntary sector brings with it new challenges as the sector and volunteerism becomes more professional. The duties and responsibilities, once carried out by volunteers, are often now the tasks of paid staff. With increased resources, volunteers often become the paid staff. As voluntary activity becomes increasingly specialised, so too, do the skills of volunteers. Thus the opportunities for volunteers without specific training continue to shrink in some areas as the degree of professionalism continues to rise.<sup>24</sup> There is therefore a need to reflect on the changing role and expectations of volunteers, particularly the implications for resources to support their engagement and active participation.

While the community and voluntary sector is expanding its remit, particularly as it becomes more engaged with the policy agenda at national and local level, there is evidence that young people are less likely to volunteer.<sup>25</sup>

The Combat Poverty Agency believes there can be several reasons for this, including:

- The opportunity to be paid for the same work
- Increased professionalism or specific skills required

<sup>22</sup> Combat Poverty Agency, (1999) Strategic Plan 1999-2001, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency.

<sup>23</sup> The Area Development Management/Combat Poverty Agency office in Monaghan administers the PEACE II programme in the south border counties. The initiatives they support have both a peace and social inclusion dimension, are very much community based and/or have a cross-border dimension. Voluntary action is a central component in the realisation of many of these projects.

<sup>24</sup> United Nations Commission for Social Development, Report of the Panel Discussion: *The Role of Volunteerism in the Promotion of Social Development*, 15 February 2001 <http://www.iyv2001.org/iyv-eng/policy/unitednations/>

<sup>25</sup> Irish Government, (2000), *Supporting Voluntary Activity: A White Paper on a Frame Work for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector*, Dublin: Government Publications Office.

- Increased time required
- Increased legal demands and accountabilities
- Other paid opportunities, due to enhanced economic situation
- Employers not fully appreciating the value of volunteering and not encouraging employees to engage in it nor having the mechanisms in place to facilitate it.
- The cost of volunteering can act as a disincentive to volunteer, particularly childcare, social care and public transport costs and access.

As stated earlier volunteering plays a vital role in preserving the stability and cohesion of societies and strengthens the participatory nature of our democracy. The time spent by people volunteering makes a valuable contribution to tackling poverty and bringing about social inclusion. Both the State and community and voluntary organisations have a role in highlighting the societal value of volunteering and in making volunteering attractive and worthwhile for people to engage in, particularly in providing training and support measures.

## **5. Recommendations for the further development of volunteering to tackle poverty in Ireland**

The Combat Poverty Agency welcomes the attention that the United Nations Year of Volunteers, 2001 has given to the voluntary action of people all over the world and in particular the role of the Irish National Committee on Volunteering in highlighting the richness and diversity of volunteering in Ireland.

In particular the Agency would like to reiterate that the active participation of volunteers is a defining characteristic of the community and voluntary sector concerned with tackling poverty. The actions of this sector have positively contributed to empowering people affected by poverty and engaging them in addressing its root causes. However there is scope for increased support from the State and increased co-operation between the State and the Community and Voluntary sector in fostering and supporting anti-poverty voluntary action.

Thus the Agency recommends that:

### **The State**

- Develops, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector, a policy framework for volunteering with an anti-poverty dimension and an infra-structure that supports volunteering. Its development would underline the Government's commitment in the 'White Paper' to support and promote voluntary action.
- Includes, as part of the development of any infrastructure to support volunteering, provision for accessible and affordable childcare, social-care and transport.
- Develops and implements a strategy to promote awareness among people receiving unemployment payments, particularly those vulnerable to exclusion and disadvantage, that they can become actively involved in and benefit from voluntary work, and still retain their payments.
- Provides adequate core funding on a multi-annual basis for community and voluntary organisations, especially those concerned with tackling poverty. This funding should take into account the resources needed to provide training and support to volunteers engaged in the activities of their respective organisations and enable them to take an active part in decision-making and consultative fora at local, regional and national level.
- Continues to enhance its relations with the community and voluntary sector in the realisation of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- Provides adequate resources to support voluntary action by emerging or new groups which have a poverty-focus, for example groups such as refugees and asylum seekers. Examples should be taken from the engagement of refugees and asylum seekers who have invested in their new communities through voluntary initiatives.
- Develops, in partnership with the community and voluntary sector, a system of recognition and accreditation of non-formal education and learning attained through volunteering.
- Recognises, as part of the life-long learning process, the complementarity of learning attained through the non-formal, formal education and training sectors.
- Develops, under the auspices of the Committee on Volunteering, a national charter of rights of volunteers.

- Continues to promote and support European Union programmes such PEACE II as a means to build peaceful inclusive communities in Ireland.
- Continues to promote and support European Voluntary Service as a means to increase youth mobility and intercultural learning in Europe and develops more targeted measures and systems of support to enable disadvantaged young people to avail of such programmes.

### **Community and Voluntary sector**

- Are actively encouraged and supported to ensure that the training and support offered to volunteers is both appropriate and applicable to their needs, and in particular to the needs of disadvantaged or socially excluded people.

### **Employers and Trade Unions**

- Are actively encouraged to recognise the value of volunteering, especially in the geographical community where the business, enterprise or service is located. This could be promoted through the social partnership process.

### **Volunteer Centres**

- Seek the development of a national network of volunteer centres. The potential for the establishment of such a vehicle would be strengthened and enhanced if it took place nation-wide, particularly in light of the reform of local government.
- Be actively encouraged and supported by the State to undertake specific programmes that encourage volunteering among groups which are marginalised or socially excluded.
- Engage with actors involved in the extension of NAPS to local level, in particular community fora at county level, with adequate support from the State.

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