

Voluntary work and civic engagement as a solution for future labour market problems? ¹

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1. VOLUNTARY WORK RAISES (TOO) GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Civic engagement and voluntary work – in Germany most often referred to as “Ehrenamt” – are internationally the topic of the day. The year 2001 was declared the “International Year of Voluntary Work”. On various occasions, voluntary work – as well as some other informal sector activities – is praised as the remedy for many social ills. Some consider civic engagement an indicator for social integration on the *micro* level. Others see in it both a solution and an indicator for social integration on the *macro* level.

In the social sector, voluntary work is claimed superior to the bureaucratic state services, as well as the expensive private services. Voluntary work is supposed to give the long-term unemployed new recognition, acceptance and self-esteem. Or, at least, to help them find their way back to employment. On the one hand, the elderly, some of who have left working life much too early, are supposed to find in voluntary work meaningful and fulfilling occupation for an active “senior existence”. On the other hand, young people are expected to learn in sports clubs the kind of social behaviour which they could hardly obtain sitting in front of the TV or

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computer screen. Moreover, voluntary work is said to socially re-integrate those citizens who have turned their backs to political parties in parliamentary democratic systems. We could continue this list.

All in all, there are at least three topic areas, in which we can follow the praising of voluntary work as a multifunctional solution – regardless of the political position of the speaker in question.

1. *The crisis of the welfare state:*

The hope of using voluntary work as a low-price means of obtaining necessary services which have otherwise become impossible to finance.

2. *The crisis of the working society:*

Voluntary work and civic engagement are expected to ease the increasing lack of paid work.

3. *The crisis of democracy as a society of equal participation:*

While the citizens are distancing themselves from politics (take the decreasing party membership and voting attendance), they should at least become democratically active in their own circles, by co-operating and sharing in decisions.

2. LABOUR MARKET PERSPECTIVES

Before we can concentrate on this question, we need to make a short diagnosis of the current and future labour market problems. Recently, there has been some positive development in the employment sector. Still, we have to observe that unemployment continues to be the economic and social problem for the European Union as a whole, and specially, for the Federal Republic of Germany. From now on, we shall focus on Germany.

If we look at the gradual increase of unemployment in the past 25 years, we also need to consider the simultaneous increase of the labour force. Both figures are a great deal higher than, say, 1975. At the same time, however, the volume of work is decreasing, due to rationalisation and to collective and individual reduction of working hours (FIGURE 1).

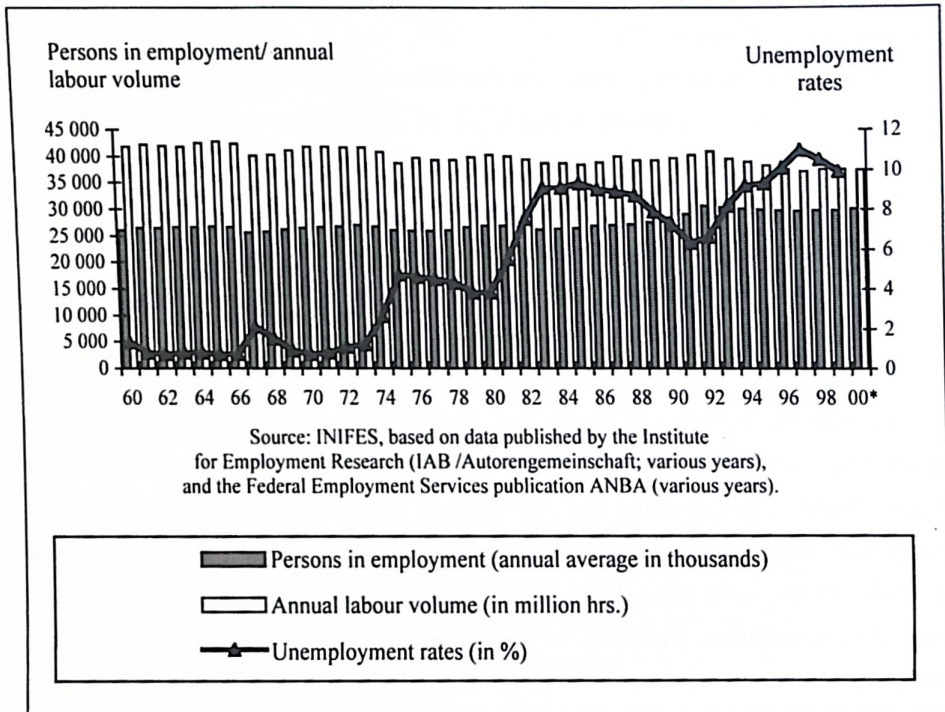
Taking a closer look, we can see that the employment rates have developed in different directions, according to the levels of qualification (FIGURE 2). On the one hand, less qualified men and women continue having their working hours reduced and being threatened by unemployment. On the other hand, the higher qualified men and women have a high employment rate and often work even longer than those under collective pay agreement. This is one of many factors indicating a splitting process in modern capitalistic societies.

Not only low qualification, but also older age (from 55, often even from 50 years upwards), and being of female sex, are the classic criteria leading to exclusion from paid work. There has been some political effort to ease the situation – the Lisbon Summit, just to name one. Nevertheless, the above mentioned groups show particularly high unemployment rates, both in Germany and the European Union as a whole. At the same time, these groups suffer from a great labour-market-slack caused by involuntary part-time, unregistered unemployment or involuntary early retirement.

So we have, in addition to registered unemployment, probably just as many *unregistered unemployed* – a fact which formal politics would most ignore.

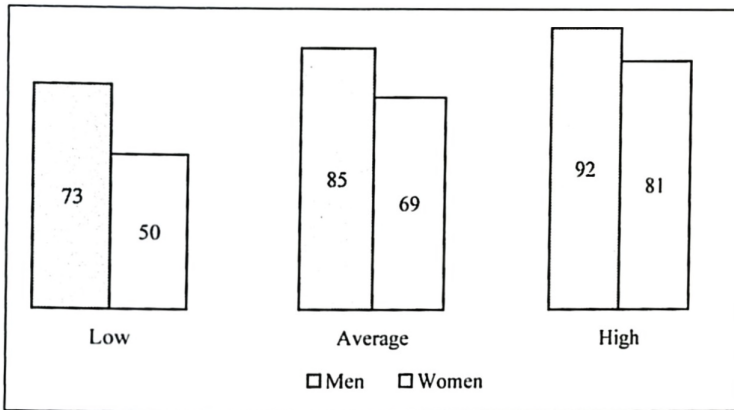
On the other hand (FIGURE 3), we all know that the demographic change already causes a dramatic ageing of our societies and is most likely to make them shrink in the near future. Consequently, there are many people who believe, mass unemployment will be a passing phenomenon, trying to trivialise it. We notice, however, that there are also fears of competitiveness being endangered by the ageing of the staff, as well as by the massive labour shortage.

FIGURE 1
**Registered unemployment (rate), persons in employment,
 and labour volume in West Germany
 1960 to 2000**



As for the ageing problem, companies are not prepared to invest in appropriate health care and training systems. They would also be more than willing to find a sufficient number of new recruits, straight out of the educational system – up-to-date know-how at no cost involved. This does not mean that the massive ageing of the employees is not a problem. We only need to look at some EU prognoses to see what great numbers of elderly people we will have in Germany and Europe in the future labour force (FIGURE 4).

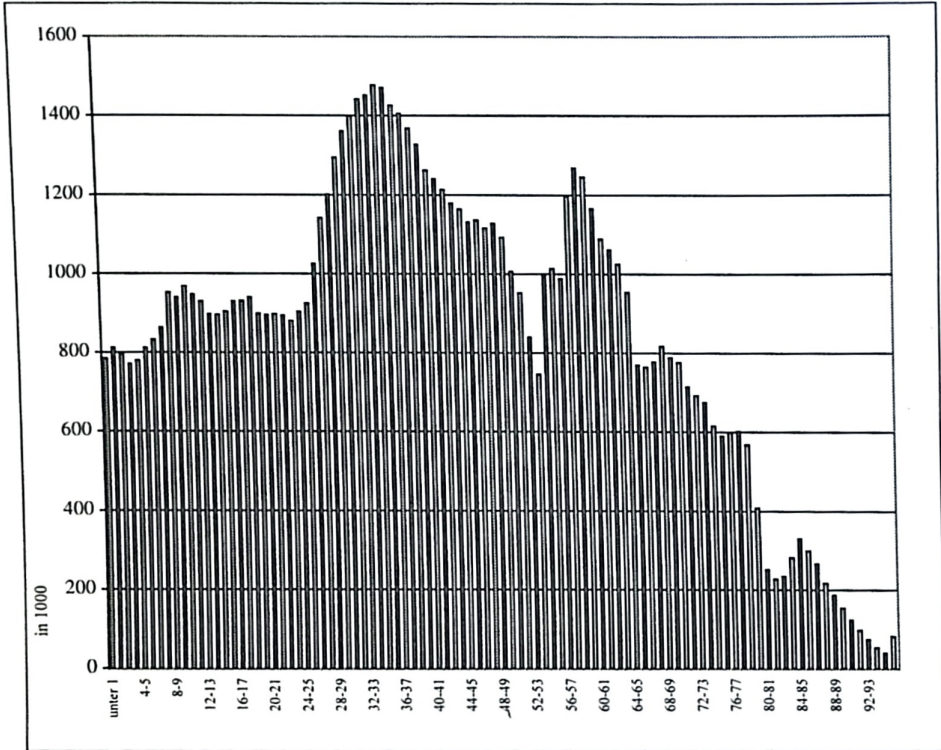
FIGURE 2
Demographic and structural problems of the labour market II
Employment rates for men and women (25-54 years of age) by qualification in Western Germany 1997



Source: Commission of the European Communities, 1998.

One of the greatest fears from the enterprises' point of view is a labour shortage on a wide front. This is hardly to be expected in the near future, before rationalisation measures have been exhausted. For this reason, the enterprises try to refuse the transformation of productivity increase into collective reduction of working hours – a development they consider irreversible. Interestingly enough, all prognoses available for the German labour market balance state that there will be no general labour shortage – not even on a long-term basis. By 2040, depending on the direction of the economic development, Germany is expected to have an unemployment rate between 5 and 10 per cent according to those prognoses. However, this does not mean that mismatches will not occur, on the contrary: they will be increasing (for instance, in the whole of Eastern Germany, and in those Southern German areas with rapid economic expansion). Nevertheless, we should not interpret the current complaints about skill gaps in, say, information technology, as a warning about an

FIGURE 3
Population by age, Germany, 1998



Source: Statistical Yearbook of Germany 2000

upcoming labour shortage. On looking into the figures mentioned in Germany, as well as in an European context, we notice a strong taste of exaggeration.

One thing is clear: unemployment will continue to be the main problem for the labour market, with increasing mismatches in qualification and regional dimensions. The people most suffering from unemployment will remain those less qualified, immigrants, women, and older people (FIGURE 5).

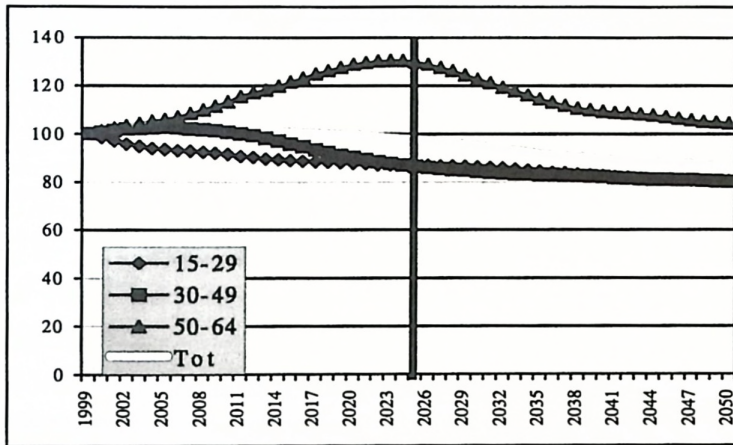
What consequence does this have for the strategy of using civic engagement and voluntary work as a cure for unemployment?

FIGURE 4

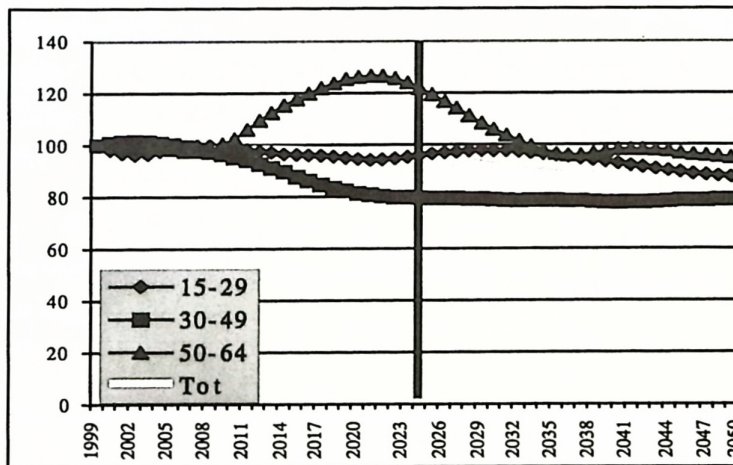
Demographic and Structural Problems of the Labour Market I

Change in working age groups between 1999 and 2050 in EU15 and Germany

EU15

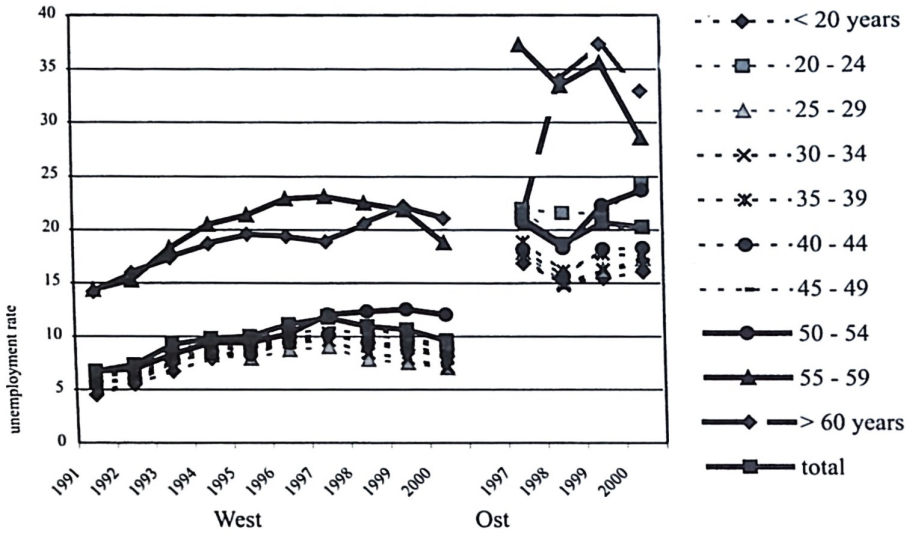


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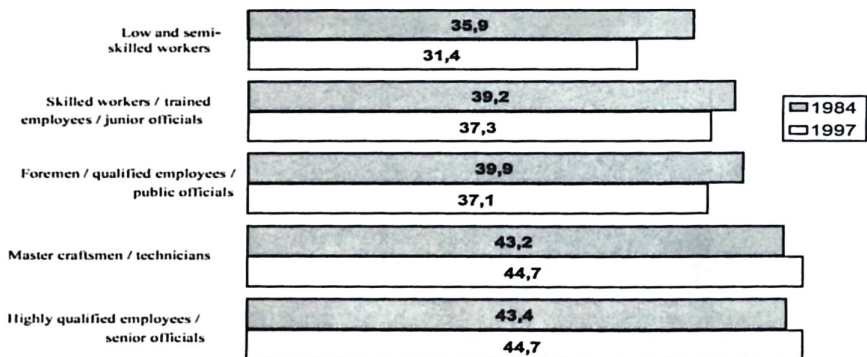
Source: Gery Coamans, ISMEA, Paris 2001-05-18

FIGURE 5
(Registered) Unemployment rates by age groups in Germany



Source: INIFES, 2001

FIGURE 5A
Hours worked by employment groups in Western Germany
1984 and 1997



Source: Bosch, Heinecker, Wagner 2001

3. CAN VOLUNTARY WORK BE A CURE FOR THE LABOUR MARKET PROBLEM GROUPS?

The state of civic engagement research is internationally still rather rudimentary. This complex subject still awaits to be explained in a sufficiently theoretical manner. International comparative studies available in this field have one thing in common: they demonstrate all chances of making erroneous international comparisons. Even on the country level, statistical data is often crudely contradictory.

In Germany, for instance, some sources report civic engagement to be increasing for some years now, while others claim the exact opposite. It is difficult to find out who is right, since different sources use totally different definitions of civic engagement.

All in all, however, it is still possible for us to use the empirical data available to formulate an answer to our question.

All current empirical studies agree on one point: civic engagement is largely a matter for the middle class, that is, for those who are well integrated in working (and social) life, and less for those who are unemployed. In the following, we will present some examples out of a variety of studies on this subject.

A recently published, extensive survey, conducted by Infratest, came to the following conclusion: "Considering the social conditions for civic engagement ... the unemployed fall into a negative category, so to speak, when it comes to living under such circumstances which allow civic engagement." This survey takes all possible variations of engagement into consideration – certainly, in order to present a relatively high civic engagement rate. The result reads as follows: out of all 25 to 50 year-old Germans, 37% are engaged in some or other civic activities. Out of the unemployed, only 22% are committed to these activities. Even though the unemployed show a tendency towards a somewhat greater extent of engagement than others, it is to be observed that those often were engaged in civic activities before becoming unemployed.

Voluntary work – like other parts of the informal economy – is mostly seen as a resource to help people with a weak position in the labour market, income distribution, and so on. Like the shadow economy, household and family work, it should compensate low income and the lack of opportunities in the labour market. Some see chances for training to build “bridges” to the official labour market. A most recent study published by the OECD states that the informal sector, and voluntary work especially, can be a source of social capital, and a way to develop human capital.

All these hopes may be justifies, and of course voluntary work and civic engagement are also not supposed to have negative implications on public budgets and social morality.

But, their environment is not neutral. Forces from the business world, and social change, do have influences on voluntary work. An emerging informalisation in the working conditions, for example, changes the forms of, and the chances for voluntary work. We have to prove whether the capacities and capabilities in the informal sector – as Sen says – are distributed in a way that enables the disadvantaged and excluded to compensate for their problems in the world of markets and public transfer systems.

It is not to be denied that there are numerous cases, in which people out of the labour market problem groups have found a meaningful and subjectively fulfilling occupation in voluntary work. In Germany, for instance, the programs “Action 55” in Saxony, and the “Initiative 3rd Age” in Baden-Württemberg have been rather successful.

There has also been a series of successful self-help initiatives for the unemployed, which have sometimes even lead to a more or less regular job, especially in the 3rd sector. This is, however, rather an exception than a rule. There are, doubtlessly, among the non-employed seeking work, people who hope to find access to regular labour market through voluntary unpaid work.

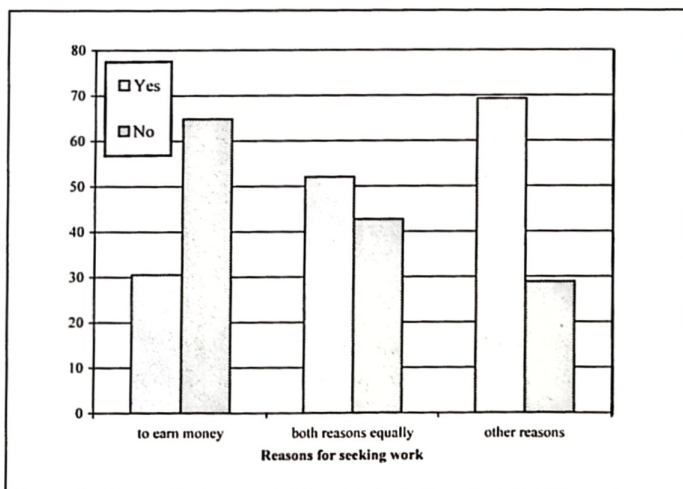
Thus, in 1998, we found in a sample inquiry among women who were neither in employment nor registered unemployed, a high percentage in search of paid

work (FIGURE 6). Almost half of these women, the so-called “hidden or quiet reserve”, claimed to be prepared – “if unavoidable, if necessary” – to accept even unpaid work, if paid work was not available. Could voluntary work then be, after all, a solution for extensive unemployment or future labour market problems?

A more close analysis of this survey makes us doubtful. If we break down the 44% willing to start voluntary work according to their motives for seeking work, we make a significant finding. On the one hand, those seeking work for financial reasons (contributing to family income, too little money, to be able to afford more, etc.), are clearly less willing to settle for unpaid work. On the other hand, out of those with other motives (boredom, self-realisation, etc.), almost 70% would, if necessary, accept voluntary work.

FIGURE 6

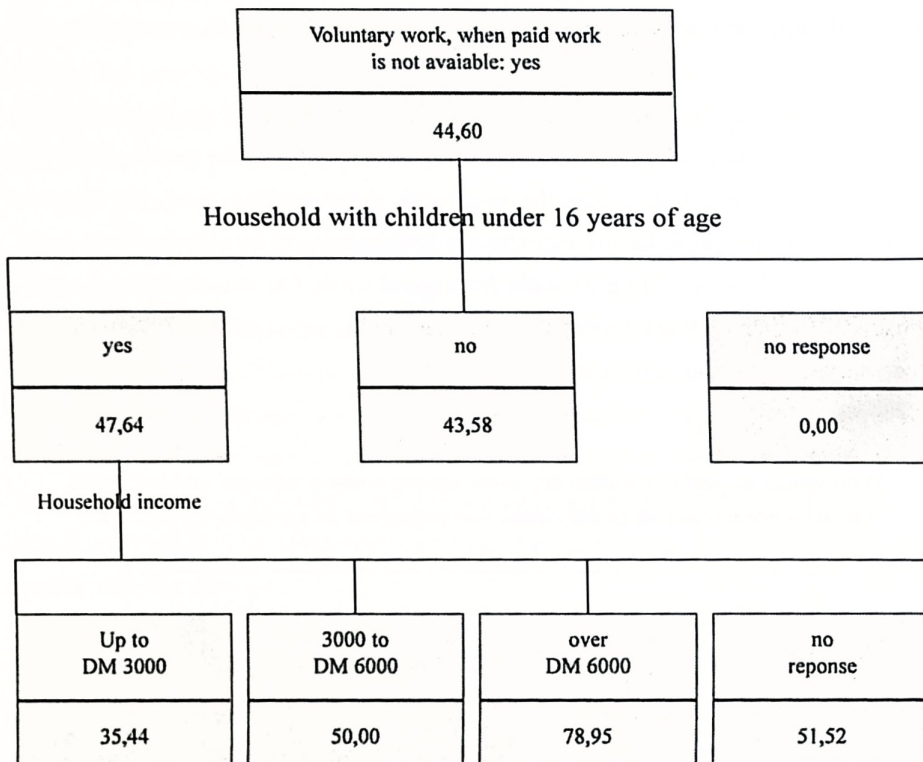
Willingness to perform voluntary work among women who are seeking work, but who are neither in employment nor registered as unemployed (1998/99)



Source: INIFES, analysis and figure based on data from an INIFES/Infratest Survey 1998/99.

FIGURE 6A

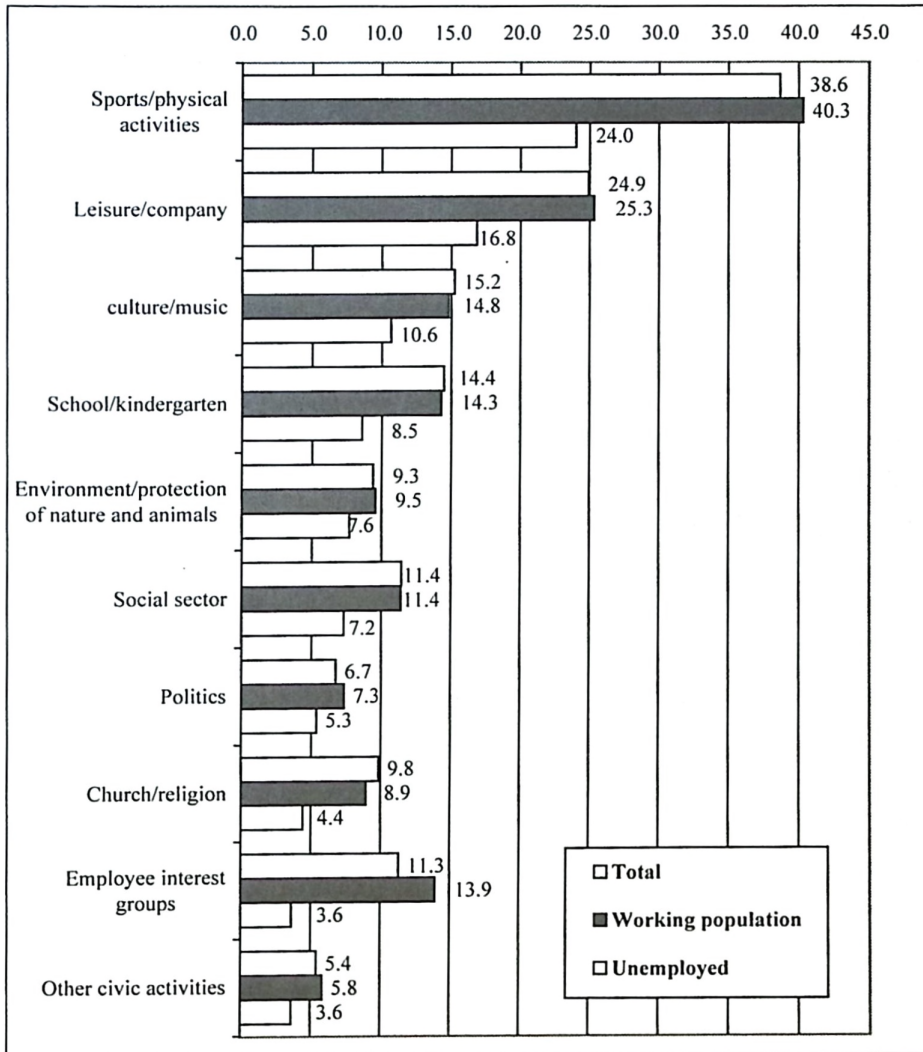
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Source: INIFES, analysis and figure based on data from an INIFES/Infraestat Survey 1998.

Let us now present further empirical results making us doubt the power of civic engagement as a standard cure for the unemployment problem (FIGURE 7).

FIGURE 7
The unemployed are less engaged in unpaid civic activities than the working population



Source: INIFES, figure based on the Infratest-Freivilligensurvey 1999.

The figure shows us detailed findings on the group-specific frequency of civic engagement from the above mentioned Infratest Inquiry in Germany. Among all the different areas and forms of civic engagement in question, there is no single one in which the unemployed would not be less engaged than the persons in employment. Moreover, the unemployed spend less time on these activities than the employed. And, if they engage in a civic activity in the first place, they have usually begun to do so before becoming unemployed.

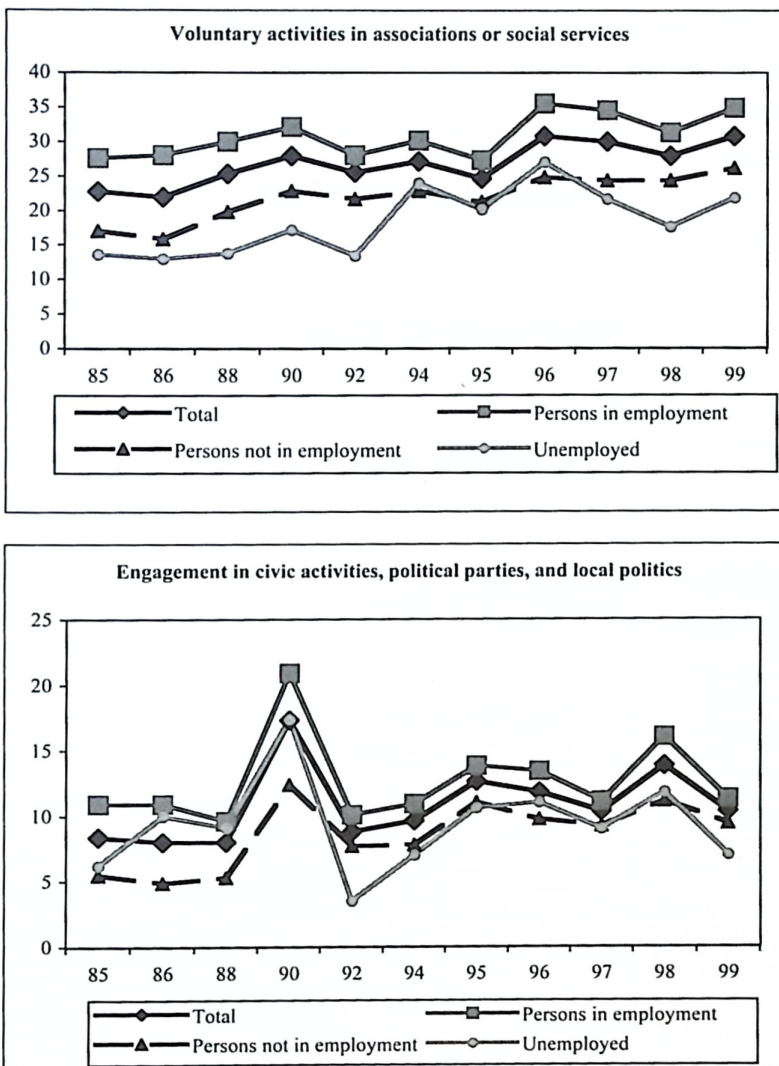
The unemployed also give distinctly different reasons for not engaging in civic activities than those in employment. They seldom name lack of time, but often find themselves unsuitable or “too old” for such engagement. They are also more prone to fear the possible costs, missing insurance, and trouble as opposed to gain for themselves.

In addition, this survey shows that civic engagement is significantly rarer among women and people with a lower education level or professional status, and – if they participate at all – they are likely to do so on a much smaller scale than the average of the people interviewed. As for our “target groups”, the potential problem groups of the current and future labour market, we can state that even just the 50-to-60-year-olds’ engagement in voluntary work is proportionally rare.

The results presented so far were flashes in temporal cross-section. Let me add some findings in a time series, this time for Western Germany only.

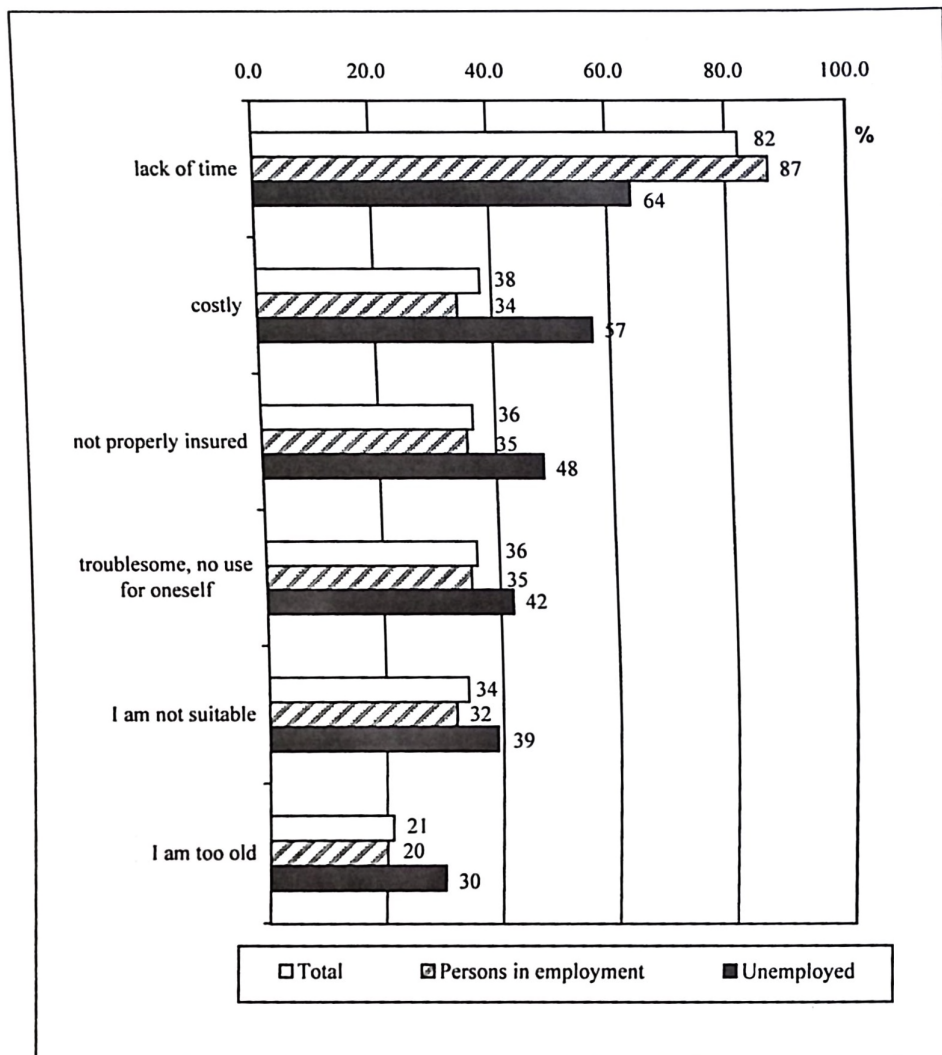
The Socio-economic Panel (FIGURE 8) shows that the unemployed are, year after year, clearly less engaged in the traditional forms of what we in Germany call “Ehrenamt” (honorary function). This includes the participation in associations, societies, and social services. In this respect, however, the persons in employment keep their above-average position over the years. The same applies for political engagement, though not quite as constantly, but still showing a clear tendency: the figures for the people in employment remain higher than those for the unemployed.

FIGURE 8
**The unemployed are less engaged in traditional voluntary work and politics:
 West Germany 1985-1999**



Source: Dathe/Kistler 2001 (Socio-economic Panel).

FIGURE 8A
 Subjective reasons for not engaging in civic activities – unemployed
 versus persons in employment



Source: INIFES, diagram based on the Infratest-Freiwilligensurvey, 1999

We can add that this empirical pattern also applies to Eastern Germany, where, in comparison, both forms of engagement are less frequent. Besides, you can see in both of these figures (Socio-economic Panel) the slight trend towards expansion of voluntary work. So in the lower figure dealing with political engagement, although the membership commitment to political parties is almost vanishing. This is – in both forms of engagement – caused by a general trend away from long-term engagement in voluntary work within fixed organisations, towards short-term, project-like activities in independent groups.

Apart from this, the results of the Socio-economic Panel and other surveys confirm the already mentioned group-specific findings :

- men perform voluntary work more often than women,
- such engagement is rather a thing for the middle class than for the socially disadvantaged, and again,
- persons in employment are more engaged than the unemployed.

Even though the figures show some single years with apparently smaller differences between the employed and the unemployed, the long-term point of view conveys a continuous disparity. This could also be seen as a demonstration of the danger of how extracting just a few years' data for comparison can lead to erroneous conclusions. In Germany, part of the public debate on this topic, and well-known fellow scientists, for instance, Ulrich Beck, have fallen for pure artefacts. It is true that unpaid activities have over the years become a bit more frequent also among the unemployed, but at the same time we need to consider that mass unemployment at the moment also touches more and more people from the middle-class (young university graduates, for example).

Let me try to make a short conclusion :

After having analysed the labour market development so far, and studied the reliable prognoses available, we can conclude the following : the demographic

development and the changes in the economic structures will cause those groups of labour force potential, whose difficulties already are out of proportion, to become the problem groups of the labour market in perhaps a more severe way : the less qualified, elderly people, foreigners, even women.

At the same time, we know that these groups are not, and have not been, inclined 'enough' to engage in voluntary activities. Therefore, we would need a good proportion of optimism and fantasy to be able to imagine how the voluntary sector should develop in order to combine the future problems of the labour market on the one hand, and voluntary work as their solution on the other hand. Please note : this is not meant to deny voluntary work being useful *per se*, or its being a meaningful occupation for the unemployed. This is certainly the case for many people, protecting them from the perils of qualification loss, anomis, etc. This must and can be supported and developed. Still, voluntary work cannot be, not even for those committed to it, and even less for the masses of unemployed people today and in the future, an alternative to paid work.

For me politicians, praising voluntary work as a cure for unemployment, act – under given circumstances like those who give a piece of paper to a blind beggar on which it is written : « Help yourself, then helps you God ».

The present situation of voluntary work in Germany

- ▶ There is an emerging discussion on voluntary work in Germany – but we have trouble expressing in an empirically founded way what's happening in this field.
- ▶ Though there are many contradictory empirical results from various surveys, it is sure that among the poorly engaged there are especially
 - *the less educated and less skilled*
 - *the unemployed*

- *women*
 - *immigrants.*
- ▶ Voluntary work (as most other activities in the informal economy) is more or less middle-class-biased.
- ▶ There is neither theoretical nor empirical evidence for voluntary work being a cure for the unemployment problem.