

What is Alternative Civilian Service?



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It is a form of national service—in lieu of military service—that allows individuals to contribute to their community in a way that does not conflict with their conscience. Some countries offer alternative service only for religious reasons.

“Urge States with a system of compulsory military service, where such provision has not already been made, to provide for conscientious objectors various forms of alternative service.”
- Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council, 24/17, 8 October 2013

How it benefits the community

Alternative service has greatly benefited various sectors of the community including public health, social welfare, security, rehabilitation, environment, labor and administration, etc. Conscientious objectors have provided useful manpower.

Germany: *“It was recognized that the alternative service programme had significant benefits to German society.”*

- Analytical report, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Taiwan: *“They are competent for social services and promote the quality of the services, helping us to enhance the country’s image of maintaining human rights.”*

- A brief introduction to the substitute system of Taiwan

Armenia: *“You guys are doing a great job for the country on very meager wages. It is obvious that you are hard working.”*

- Supervisor at the Yerevan/Shengavit Community Services

Why it does not threaten national interests

Some have expressed concern of possible side-effects to implementing alternative civilian service. However, no country reports a significant problem when a screening system is well-established.

Concern for an increase in military evaders? “No”

“Many were concerned that alternative service might be used as a means of evading the military service. However, their fear proved to be invalid. They plan to make it ever shorter so that its duration is the same as that of active duty service.”

- Chen Wei wen, Director of Taiwan’s National Conscription Agency

Concern for equity of national duty? “No”

“It is in principle possible, and in practice common, to conceive alternatives to compulsory military service that do not erode the basis of the principle of universal conscription but render equivalent social good and make equivalent demands on the individual, eliminating unfair disparities between those engaged in compulsory military service and those in alternative service.”

- UN Human Rights Committee, Communications Nos. 1321-1322/2004



International standards of alternative civilian service

Many conscientious objectors willingly serve the community in an alternative civilian service program that meets international standards.

“Alternative” not punitive

The term for alternative civilian service is not unreasonably longer than the military service and does not discriminate against conscientious objectors.

“Alternative service may not exceed one and a half times the length of armed military service” - European Committee of Social Rights of the Council of Europe, Conclusions 2008 (Greece)

“The conditions of alternative serve were punitive in nature, including the requirement to perform such services outside the places of permanent residence, the receipt of low salaries, which are below the subsistence level for those who are assigned to work in social organizations, and the restrictions in the freedom of movement for the persons concerned.” - UN Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations, CCPR/C/RUS/CO/6

“Civilian” without involvement of the military

It is not controlled or supervised by the military or in any way connected to the military or any of its departments, such as the Ministry of Defense or the Military Manpower Administration.

“Alternative service should be outside the military sphere and not under military command” - UN Human Rights Committee, Communications Nos. 1642-1741/2007

“Any form of control over alternative service should be of civilian nature. The military should have no supervisory role in the day-to-day operational supervision of those who perform alternative service. The authorities should make sure that any bylaw, other regulation or practical application measure is fully in line with the principle of civilian control over alternative service..” - Opinion of the Venice Commission, December 20, 2011

“Service” that promotes public interests

Service involves a dignified work that benefits the public and does not violate the conscience of the men in the program.

“It must be a real service to the community and compatible with respect for human rights.” - UN Human Rights Committee, Communications Nos. 1642-1741/2007



■ Countries where conscientious objectors are punished in the absence of alternative service

