

A REFLECTION ON TODAY'S GLOBAL VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY

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ABOUT THIS CONTRIBUTION

IAVE – The International Association for Volunteer Effort – is the only global network of civil society organisations (CSOs), businesses and grassroots leaders that exists solely to promote, strengthen and celebrate volunteering, in all of the myriad ways it happens throughout the world.

At the authors' invitation, 22 leaders of volunteering from 19 countries, from every region of the world, and all members of IAVE's network, contributed their perspectives to assist in their preparation of this contribution to the 2015 CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report. They included national volunteer centres, those responsible for volunteering in their global companies, members of IAVE's board of directors and its network of volunteer 'national representatives', all people who are on the front line of leadership for volunteering. While the authors and the respondents all are associated with IAVE, this article is, however, not an official statement of IAVE's position on the issues discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering – the willingness of people to commit their time, talent and energy, without regard for immediate financial rewards, to help others, while helping themselves – runs like a river through the centuries of recorded history. Like a river, it constantly branches and expands, creating new channels, and constantly creating new energy to sustain itself.

Thus, what may appear to be today's trends in volunteering most often have their antecedents decades in the past. Today's novelty is often an extension of developments that began as early as the 1960s, when formal attention to volunteering emerged and the development of supportive infrastructure began.

A fundamental trend, however, is the steady globalisation of volunteering, and an understanding that it can and does appear in some form in virtually every society, under every form of government, and as part of every religion. Today, more than ever, there is a global volunteer community that, if nothing else, agrees on the value of people volunteering to help one another.

Volunteering provides significant value as a primary non-financial resource for society. Resources are too often defined purely in financial terms. Yet major contributions to the work of CSOs are made by volunteers, pro bono services and in-kind contributions of goods and services. Of these, volunteering too often is the least acknowledged and underutilised of these non-financial resources.

This contribution to the 2015 CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report first discusses four dynamic forces, 'the disruptors', that are already bringing major changes to the field, and second, identifies seven major challenges and issues to which the global volunteer community must give priority attention. This article is, by design, an overview, rather than an in-depth analysis. The intent is to stimulate dialogue, rather than to provide definitive conclusions.

THE DISRUPTORS

These four forces are making significant impact. They are relevant to every actor in our global volunteer community, from the member states of the United Nations to leadership and volunteer-involving organisations to individual volunteers.

1. THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

In 2014, there were significant efforts to ensure that volunteering is recognised as a strategic asset in the post 2015 development agenda and the forthcoming SDGs. Responding to the leadership of United Nations Volunteers, both the Post 2015 Working Group of volunteer involving organisations and IAVE worked to mobilise their networks to influence actors at the UN, and its member states, to include volunteering in all relevant documents on the SDGs.

As the Lima Declaration of the International Forum for Volunteering in Development, held in October 2014, stated:¹

"...the full potential of volunteers to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs can be unlocked only by an SDG framework that explicitly recognizes and supports volunteerism...."

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The SDGs also may serve as a framework for CSOs and businesses to expand and focus their volunteer efforts. For example, in 2014, announcement was made of Impact 2030, a coalition of businesses and CSOs, intended to do just that for corporate volunteering.

2. SKILLS BASED VOLUNTEERING (SBV)

Certainly not new, but increasingly in vogue, is the concept of skills based volunteering, particularly in the context of employer-supported volunteering. It makes sense that, by encouraging and assisting people to use their work skills as volunteers, greater impact can be achieved.

For many companies, SBV has become the sine qua non of corporate volunteering, as it also enables their workers to continue to develop their skills by putting them to work in environments significantly different from those found in their workplaces. Cross-border SBV schemes allow companies to provide short term, rigorously planned opportunities for workers to use their professional skills in the global south, often with significant, if localised, impact. But such schemes have also generated growing frustration among businesses that see CSOs and public sector agencies as often having little or no interest in or ability to engage their volunteers effectively.

Input for this article included suggestions from two countries, in different regions of the world, that SBV is an important component of diaspora volunteering, involving the return of people to their mother country to reconnect with their heritage while meaningfully contributing their skills.

Unfortunately, too often, SBV is defined solely in terms of professional skills, typified in volunteering by doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers and programmers, for example. When applied rigidly, that becomes exclusionary and disrespectful of the myriad of skills that can be found in any workplace. It is important that both suppliers (particularly businesses) and consumers (CSOs and public agencies) of volunteers recognise the broad array of skills that may be available, and creatively identify the ways that they can be put to work through volunteering.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

One of those who provided input for this article wrote:

“Technology has changed the way paid work is done, and indeed [has changed] entire industries. Technology is changing volunteerism too. Adoption of wireless and mobile computing increases the potential for micro-volunteering and online volunteering. Technology also affects how charities, and volunteers themselves, can mobilise resources, for example, through location-based services, online communities going beyond friends and families, crowdfunding, predictive analytics and ‘customer’ relationship management.”

Another pointed to this news report:²

“Today’s younger volunteers... perform acts of service every day, whether they use their social

networks to rack up millions of views for civic-minded videos or drive fundraising for people in need through online platforms... [A]s the service movement evolves, we should acknowledge that, in many cases, the greatest asset a volunteer can offer is his or her ability to quickly mobilize thousands of Facebook friends or Twitter followers to raise awareness or dollars and to inspire action."

A dramatic example of the impact of social media is in disaster-related volunteering. Now, because of the power it gives people to mobilise others, spontaneous volunteers can be on site much more quickly than even first responders, let alone humanitarian relief agencies. This is rapidly changing the dynamics of volunteer participation in response to disasters, raising challenges to those organisations, as untrained volunteers who want to help are self-organising.

It is clear that social media and mobile technology, as one of our respondents wrote:

"...will enable people to volunteer in new ways and will potentially mean that people who have previously been excluded from volunteering are able to participate."

But he also warns:

"However, it may also mean that people without access to technology could be excluded."

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They must become adept at maximising social media's benefits for them, which means they must prepare their volunteer leaders and paid staff to function comfortably with it.

4. THE COMING GENERATIONAL CHANGE OF LEADERSHIP

Much of the leadership that has built the concept of a global volunteer community has come from those who were born prior to 1960, including the authors of this article, who thus are comfortable raising this topic. That generation is arriving at the point of retirement. The issue is not whether it can be replaced. There is no question of that, as younger leaders are rapidly emerging throughout the world, particularly in the global south.

Rather, the challenge may be for the older leaders to move gracefully out of the way while still finding opportunities to contribute. Their legacy must be that they helped prepare the next generation of leaders for volunteering, offering them increasing opportunities to be heard and to assume expanding responsibilities. They must demonstrate their openness to the ideas and perspectives of the new generation. Their relevance will not be in their remembrance of things past, although a little historical perspective never hurts, but in their ability to make way effectively for their successors.

The new generation of leaders must be encouraged and must be willing to undertake fundamental discussions that the current generation may believe are long settled. Questions such as, how do we define volunteering, what are the values inherent in volunteering,

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and, as discussed below, what is the appropriate relationship between paid and unpaid work, must continue to be discussed. The answers must grow from the realities of today's world, rather than from the way things were.

This is why IAVE always schedules a companion youth conference or a special youth track at all of its world and regional conferences.

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Here are seven significant issues that must be addressed and, if possible, resolved, in order truly to strengthen volunteering as a recognised global force for problem-solving and change. In some manner, they ran through virtually all responses we received from our invited informants.

1. THE ABSENCE OF NATIONAL POLICIES ON VOLUNTEERING AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUPPORT

In the vast majority of countries, particularly those in the global south, there are no national policies to guide the development of volunteering, no significant government investment in developing and sustaining appropriate national and local infrastructure to support volunteering, and no coordinated efforts to create an enabling environment.

In countries with national volunteer centres or similar structures, almost entirely in the global north, there

appears to be a trend toward reduced financial support for these from governments, despite the contributions volunteers can and do make to the delivery of public services.

In 2015, IAVE is launching a first ever global study of national leadership structures and systems for volunteering, as a way to build a knowledge base about them, and to build a strong case for their value and impact.

2. MEASUREMENT OF IMPACT

Appropriately, there is growing discussion of how to maximise the impact of volunteers on specific problems and needs. This undoubtedly will grow if volunteering is formally recognised as an asset to address the SDGs. Currently, much of the discussion of impact is being driven by global companies that want to be able to document the return on investment of their volunteer efforts. Unfortunately, there is precious little investment being made in developing sensible, manageable and cost effective impact measurement. Complicating this is an absence of an overall coordinated effort to do so, resulting in disagreement over what should be measured and how it should be done.

3. INCLUSION

All people have the ability to volunteer. But not all people have the opportunity to volunteer. Why not? In large part this may be because of stereotypes related to the nature of people 'in need'. People who live in poverty, who have physical and emotional disabilities, who are impacted on by disasters, or who are very young or very old, are often perceived

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as people who require help, not as people who have skills, capacity and desire to help others and to help themselves.

This is an issue that is rarely discussed. Indeed, volunteering efforts by people in these groups too often become used as ‘inspirational examples’ for those without challenges rather than exemplars of what others in their circumstances could do, if given the chance. Nor is there recognition that volunteering by marginalised communities, rather than for them, can be an effective strategy to empower these groups and improve their lives.

Work must be done to ensure that volunteering is genuinely open to everyone who wishes to participate, recognising and reducing barriers that may exist because of people’s age, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, emotional or physical health, and religious or political beliefs.

4. THE FAILURE TO RECOGNISE THE REALITY OF VOLUNTEERING IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

For too many in the global north, the global south is seen as a place where volunteers go in order to help, not as a place where there are millions of indigenous volunteers already at work in their communities every day.

The problem is exacerbated by the growth of ‘voluntourism’, often undertaken as a commercial endeavour, where people from the global north combine a holiday with volunteering. Many of these efforts are legitimate. But there also are significant negative

implications that have only recently begun to receive attention. For example, the Better Care Network and Save the Children UK are in the forefront of identifying the negative impacts of volunteering in orphanages by visitors to the global south.³

While cross-border corporate volunteering may be seen as contributing to the stereotype, it is important to note that most global companies that sponsor such programmes also create teams drawn from their global workforce, thus contributing in a small way to the growth of south to south volunteering.

As one of our respondents noted, there is not sufficient recognition of the potential of south to south volunteering as a way for countries with similar realities to learn from each other’s innovations and best practices. Increased investment in such schemes could potentially significantly increase impact, while reinforcing the value of indigenous volunteering.

5. THE LACK OF READINESS TO ENGAGE VOLUNTEERS

It is an open secret that too often CSOs, public sector agencies and community-based groups are ill-prepared to engage volunteers effectively in their work. In many cases, they and their paid staff members are openly resistant to volunteers. Often this is because they do not recognise volunteers as a resource that can help them achieve their missions.

This is a problem that cannot be ignored if volunteering is to have its maximum impact. Those who are promoting skills-based volunteering already express frustration at the difficulty of finding appropriate

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placements for those volunteers. As one respondent noted, there is a gap between what volunteers are looking for and what organisations are looking for. A concerted effort is needed to build volunteer friendly organisations, which are willing to address their cultural, attitudinal and practical barriers to effective volunteer involvement.

6. THE RELATIONSHIP OF UNPAID AND PAID WORK

Volunteering is work, albeit unpaid, and like all work brings benefits to the worker, such as personal or spiritual fulfilment, self-confidence and new social connections. Among the most important benefits, particularly for young volunteers, are learning and practising new skills, gaining experience in a workplace and building a record of work experience, all toward the goal of increasing one's employability.

In its invitation to develop this article, CIVICUS posited that there might be a "growing elitism" in volunteering based on:

"...how internships and volunteer opportunities are sometimes... [seen]... as a means to embellish... CVs and enhance... career prospects rather than an end in itself."

Our respondents firmly rejected this hypothesis on three grounds. First, there is a long-standing consensus that volunteering benefits the volunteer as much or more as the individuals or organisation served. Second, the act of volunteering is not "an end in itself" but always the means to another end. Finally, it is not

"a small group of upwardly mobile or socially well-connected individuals" who potentially can benefit in this way from volunteering. It is every volunteer.

Too little has been done to develop and disseminate specific strategies for both volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations to legitimise and maximise these employment-related benefits. Youth volunteers may not know how to document their experiences or to translate them into terms that support their search for paid work. They also may be reluctant to request such support from the organisations in which they volunteer. Those organisations may be unprepared to document the nature of volunteer work, the skills learned and the specific contributions made by volunteers in ways that are helpful to their volunteers. Finally, employers must be educated to understand that volunteer experiences can and should be used in assessing potential employees.

7. THE VALUES INHERENT IN VOLUNTEERING AND THEIR CONFLICT WITH REALITY

In its Universal Declaration on Volunteering, issued in 2001, IAVE made the case that:⁴

"Volunteering is a fundamental building block of civil society. It brings to life the noblest aspirations of humankind - the pursuit of peace, freedom, opportunity, safety, and justice for all people."

But is it correct that, generally, those who give leadership to volunteering share a wider variety of values, such as those in the IAVE declaration? If they were

asked why is volunteering important, would they agree with IAVE's assertion?

To assume that they would is to carry the risk of believing that all share what some would argue are predominantly western or global northern values. These might include values about inclusion, the ways in which volunteers not only can but should challenge the status quo, and about the rights of people to be engaged not only in problem-solving volunteering but also in advocacy and social change.

We rarely discuss whether these assumptions are correct. For example, does volunteering mean the same thing worldwide? Is the rejection of barriers to participation – including those rooted in prevailing social, cultural or religious mores – a prerequisite for one to be recognised as a leader for volunteering? As we call for the creation of national policies on volunteering, do we accept and value those established by governments in autocratic countries? Does voluntary helping, as a fundamental human activity, stand outside the framework of cultural, religious and political norms within which it may occur? Are there forms of volunteering that should be rejected as not being part of the global volunteer community?

Probably because such questions have the potential to divide as well as to bring together, they are not often on the agenda for discussion. But, if the founders of IAVE almost 50 years ago were correct when they saw volunteering as a way to 'build bridges of understanding,' then it is incumbent that the risk is embraced and that meaningful dialogue on these questions is encouraged and stimulated.

CONCLUSION

Two common needs that run throughout this article are the needs for increased dialogue and for greater collaboration. These are, of course, intertwined: effective dialogue leads to greater understanding, which can beget a willingness to work together toward mutually shared goals. Both demand a commitment to investing the time and leadership energy required for them to succeed. But it is an investment, if truly made, that can pay huge dividends in expanding, strengthening and sustaining our rapidly emerging global volunteer community.

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1 International Forum for Volunteering in Development, The Lima Declaration, 2014, <http://ivco.cdn.wusc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Lima-Declaration-English-final-13.11.14.pdf>.

2 'The new age of volunteering', USA Today, 21 March 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2014/03/21/>

america-volunteers-community-service-millennials-column/6627419.

3 See, for example, Better Care Network, Better Volunteering, Better Care, 2014, <http://bettercarenetwork.org/BCN/details.asp?id=32465&themeID=1002&topicID=1017>.

4 IAVE, Universal Declaration on Volunteering, 2001, <http://www.iave.org/advocacy-3>.