

Volunteering and Social Activism: Pathways for Participation in Human Development

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Abstract

Volunteering and social activism are sometimes understood as separate spheres of action. Yet activities such as advocacy, campaigning, and awareness-raising can be associated with both volunteering and social activism. This commentary explores the dynamic relationships between volunteering and social activism in relation to social change and development by looking at diverse forms of people's participation in society. In particular, the authors consider how volunteering and social activism contribute to people's participation in meeting development commitments such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The authors draw upon a 2007-2008 study commissioned by CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, the International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE,) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV), which engaged over 100 volunteer-involving organizations and tapped the experience of individuals from 54 countries. The authors conclude that both volunteering and social activism are important strategies for fostering people's participation in social change and human development and have the potential to help foster the scale and diversity of participation needed to confront major development challenges.

Key Words:

volunteering, social activism, development, participation

Authors' Note

*The following commentary summarizes the main themes and findings of a 2008 publication, *Volunteering and Social Activism: Pathways for Participation in Human Development*, and draws heavily from the original published text. The authors wish to acknowledge the three collaborating organizations that published the original report: (1) CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation; (2) the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAV); and (3) United Nations Volunteers (UNV). The three organizations have a long-standing relationship which dates back to the 2001 International Year of the Volunteer, and seek to promote a greater understanding of the value of volunteering for society. The full publication may be downloaded in English, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish at:*

<http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/resources/research-reports/global/doc/volunteerism-and-social-activism.html>

The 2008 publication, *Volunteering and Social Activism: Pathways for Participation in Human Development* offers an innovative conceptual framework for understanding volunteering and social activism in relation to fostering development. By identifying dynamic relationships between volunteering and social activism, the authors challenge conventional perceptions of volunteering and social activism as mutually distinct activities. The reader is asked to consider a range of individual activities as diverse as visiting the elderly, organising a local community meeting, raising awareness about HIV/AIDS, teaching a young girl to read, or advocating for policies to reduce poverty. Using the lens of participation, the authors argue that, together, volunteering and social activism both make vital contributions to promoting people's involvement in human development and social change.

The paper is structured in four parts. Part one considers how volunteering and social activism are understood. The authors argue that sometimes the full range of volunteering is not adequately recognized or valued. While charity is one aspect of volunteering, other activities such as advocacy, campaigning, lobbying, and awareness-raising can also involve volunteering. Similarly, while social activism certainly involves public disobedience, it also encompasses activities like advocacy and awareness-raising. This apparent overlap points to some commonality between volunteering and social activism, which can produce a mutually supportive relationship between the two spheres of activity.

Three areas of commonality between volunteering and social activism are discussed next in part one. First, volunteering, like social activism, can be purposely oriented towards social change.

For example, volunteering is sometimes directed at influencing agenda-setting, policy-making, decision-making, and representation. This departs from some perceptions of volunteering as solely concerned with addressing the symptoms (rather than the causes) of social problems. Secondly, volunteering and social activism are also key mechanisms for enabling participatory development, a process critical for sustainable development. And thirdly, volunteering and social activism foster myriad opportunities for participation by people from a wide range of circumstances and backgrounds.

Part two identifies four key ways in which volunteering and social activism support one another in fostering participation. Here, the authors focus on the unique and valuable contributions of both volunteering and social activism. First, volunteering can help people start engaging with social change and development issues. However, the most significant finding is that most engaged individuals participate in multiple types of activities, ranging from traditional forms of volunteering to political activism, and that their participation can change at different points in their lives. Second, the role of social activism in providing leadership, defining areas for engagement, and mobilizing individuals is highlighted. Social activism is recognized for its role in helping to direct and channel individual efforts for change. Third, the authors point out that social activism relies on the contributions of volunteers to effect the change it seeks. And fourth, one of the most critical ways in which volunteering supports social activism is by helping it reflect the local needs of the communities it seeks to assist.

Part three focuses on how volunteering, including aspects of social activism, can foster people's participation in development, particularly in achieving the

eight Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs (End Poverty 2015 Millennium Campaign; 2008). The MDGs respond to the main development challenges of our time and were officially derived from the Millennium Declaration adopted by 189 Heads of States at the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000. Based on time-bound and measurable targets, the MDGs seek to: (1) reduce extreme poverty, (2) attain universal primary education, (3) promote gender equality and women's empowerment, (4) reduce child mortality, (5) improve maternal health, (6) fight epidemics like HIV/AIDS, (7) attain environmental sustainability, and (8) create a global partnership for development. World leaders have agreed to achieve the Goals by 2015.

One important finding is that volunteering helps promote social inclusion by providing opportunities for marginalized groups, such as poor women, to engage in participatory development processes. In this way, volunteering helps to fulfill the MDGs one and three, focused upon eradicating extreme poverty and promoting women's empowerment. Through volunteer-led advocacy efforts, the beliefs and behavior of ordinary individuals, as well as those who control resources, can be changed. This contributes to promoting environmental sustainability, MDG seven, and also MDGs four, five, and six, all of which relate to improving health, particularly among women and children. Finally, participation through volunteering can help equip individuals, including young people, with the confidence, skills and knowledge necessary to effect change in their world. By facilitating informed participation in development, volunteering can contribute to achieving all of the MDGs.

In part four, the authors recommend four approaches that can deepen and sustain people's participation in development and

social change. First, the creation of new and diverse opportunities for involvement is fundamental to promoting participation. Volunteer centers can assist by offering opportunities for participation, which reflect a wide range of volunteer activities. Secondly, investing in good volunteer management is crucial for expanding opportunities for involvement. This entails developing volunteer opportunities which are wide-ranging and flexible so that people from diverse backgrounds can participate. Third, recognition of volunteer contributions by volunteer resource managers as well as by volunteer-involving organizations is important for widening and sustaining participation

The fourth recommendation is that each sector has a role to play in creating an enabling environment for people's participation. Governments should support the development of programs that promote participation, particularly in relation to national development priorities. Civil society should advance a greater understanding of the intrinsic value of participation. Furthermore, the instrumental value of both volunteering and social activism should be recognized and deployed in the work of civil society organizations. The private sector should invest in corporate social responsibility so that employees can participate in a range of volunteer opportunities, including activities that advance social change and development. Finally, the United Nations and other international agencies should facilitate the creation of an enabling environment through support to their private and civil society partners.

A key message throughout the paper is that participation, in its multiplicity, is fundamental to achieving development goals. Indeed, both volunteering and social activism are powerful vehicles for fostering engagement. In this way, both forms of

participation are an empowering and positive force for development and change. The authors conclude with a challenge to all spheres of society: Recognize the combined potential of volunteering and social activism to broaden and sustain people's participation in human development and social change. Only in this way, they argue, can the vast potential of people's participation be unleashed for the advancement of human development.

References

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About the Authors

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