

Strengthening Civil Society Through Volunteerism

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Abstract

As a participant in the Contemporary Issues Fellowship Program funded by the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs, United States Department of State, the author studied the activities of over 25 organizations in the United States to gain an understanding of the role of volunteerism for creating an active civil society. This paper contains a summary of the observations of formalized volunteering in the United States and recommendations for strengthening volunteerism in her native country, Uzbekistan.

Key Words: civil society, NGO, non-government organization, Uzbekistan, volunteerism

At the heart of volunteerism are the ideals of service and solidarity and the belief that together we can make the world better.

(Kofi Annan, Secretary-General, United Nations)

Background

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) first appeared in Uzbekistan when it gained its independence. NGOs are an important factor for building a civil society and democracy. Volunteerism development is one of the methods to form active, civically minded members of society.

Uzbekistan has experience with informal volunteerism. One of its ancient traditions is for neighbors on a neighborhood committee (mahalla) to help each other and be united to solve their community's problems. NGOs in Uzbekistan have increasingly focused attention on volunteerism development. Volunteers help with the realization of many NGO missions, including international organizations. According to a United Nations Volunteer report "Volunteers and Millennium Development Goals in Uzbekistan. For a better life,"

Volunteers in Uzbekistan play a vital role in helping to solve the critical problems addressed by the Millennium Development Goals. In the past decade

many volunteers have worked with communities and directly in the field providing their support, experience and commitment to the cause of sustainable human development.

Because formal volunteerism in NGOs is a new phenomenon in Uzbekistan, Uzbek NGOs have little knowledge of or experience creating volunteer management systems for managing formalized volunteer programs. It is important for Uzbek NGOs to understand the American notions of civil society, nonprofit sector, and volunteerism in order to increase the social activity of the population as a way to solve social problems. Also, it is important to adapt and apply relevant experiences and practices from American volunteer organizations to develop the practices of volunteerism in Uzbekistan.

Summary of Research Findings

While studying the activity of over 25 organizations in the United States (nonprofit, profit, and government) that have

different kinds of volunteer programs, the main findings are the following:

- Volunteerism development begins with the organization's structure. Organizations in the United States pay a lot of attention to volunteerism development. Most organizations have a person who is responsible for volunteer programs (i.e., volunteer administrator, director of volunteer service). Some organizations include the development of a volunteer program in their strategic plan, one of the best ways to recruit volunteers.
- There are different kinds of volunteerism: formal and informal; short-term, long-term, and episodic; family volunteering; and international volunteerism. Informal volunteerism is usually based on community service or helping neighbors. Corporate and governmental volunteer programs also exist.
- The government, through education programs, encourages volunteer work. Community service hours are one of the methods to involve students in volunteerism. The President's Volunteer Service Awards and other awards also show that the government recognizes and promotes volunteerism development.
- Nonprofit organizations encourage corporate volunteer programs through regular contact with companies and by inviting employees to be board members and establishing awards and prizes. Many companies encourage their employees to donate time or to be members of boards of directors through small-grants programs that award cash grants to NGOs where employees volunteer a certain number of hours.
- All generations of the population are involved in volunteerism, but the most active members are seniors and young people (students). Many school systems promote volunteerism through learn and serve programs that combine learning curriculum with compulsory community service activities. Research has shown that youth exposed to volunteerism at an early age tend to develop a life-long practice of volunteering. Adults are often involved in volunteerism as part of a corporate volunteer program or in short-term volunteerism.
- Each generation has a different motivation to volunteer. Young people want to gain new skills, to build strong resumes, and to get scholarships. Seniors want to be active, feel useful, and meet with people. But all of them want *to give something back to the community, to do something useful* as a part of American history and culture. According to Sharnell Brya, author of "Percentage of Americans Who Volunteer Is on the Rise," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (February 17, 2005):
 - ... Seventy-five percent of those who volunteer said that acting on their moral values was either an absolutely important or very important factor in why they volunteer. This compares with 47 percent who volunteer to gain new experiences, 42 percent who volunteer because they were helped by a volunteer in the past, and 39 percent who volunteer because of a desire to meet other people.
- Volunteer management has a strong structure with key elements such as volunteer program planning, needs assessments, recruitment, matching,

interviewing, background checks as a part of risk management, orientation and training, supervision and motivation, recognition, evaluation, and retention. The presence of such a structure strengthens the effective management of volunteers.

- The volunteer administrator must be knowledgeable and skilled. The volunteer administrator is a key person to paid and volunteer staff. S/he advocates and protects the volunteers' and organizations' interests and needs. How volunteerism is attractive and interesting for people also depends on the volunteer administrator. Volunteer administrators collaborate with each other through volunteer administrator associations and networks. Professional development is also available through seminars, conferences, and newsletters.
- Serving as a board member on an NGO board of directors is another kind of volunteerism and requires the utilization of other methods for working with volunteers. Working with these leadership volunteers often involves different procedures for selection, recruitment, recognition, planning, and retention. Board members are responsible for NGO governance and fiscal management and thus play a very important role in the NGO structure in the United States.

Recommendations

Below are preliminary recommendations for Uzbek non-governmental and nonprofit community organizations:

- NGOs must reconsider their structure and create or strengthen volunteer administrator positions to effectively

develop volunteer programs that promote the organization's mission, solve the social problems of Uzbek society, and increase civil participation in general.

- NGOs should partner with neighborhood community organizations (mahallas) and use their experience in informal volunteerism to build and promote a new brand of volunteerism.
- Managers of volunteers should form cooperative networks to provide opportunities for information sharing and professional development. Professional networks help promote volunteerism and excellence in volunteer management by increasing the skills and knowledge of professionals responsible for working with volunteers.
- NGOs must work in partnership with the government, business companies, and mass media to promote volunteerism. Highlighting the benefits to society, the community, and to individual volunteers can help increase awareness of volunteer contributions and the overall impact of volunteerism.
- International organizations can help promote volunteerism and foster the development of volunteer program specialists through grants and resources for seminars, trainings, conferences, scholarships, and funds for newsletters and supplies. International organizations can facilitate the exchange of information and professional exchanges to develop volunteer management skills in local personnel.
- The Uzbek government, voluntary sector, and business sector can support

the development of volunteer programs and volunteer administrators by providing small grants for travel to international conferences and forums, such as the International Association for Voluntary Effort (IAVE) World Volunteerism Conference. Exposure to schemes and models in other developing and developed countries can provide examples and structures that can strengthen ongoing efforts in Uzbekistan.

- The NGO community can facilitate and promote dialogue between the

government and business community regarding the value of volunteerism and civic participation as a strategy for addressing local and national development priorities.

- The NGO community can create effective schemes and models for engaging volunteers from all levels of society including youth and elderly volunteers, to highlight volunteer potential and measure the impact they can have on important social issues.

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About the Author

Dilfuza Bahrieva, a graduate of Samarkand State University, became interested in citizen participation in problem-solving and decision-making through her involvement with a developing NGO community in Uzbekistan. She served as a volunteer youth program leader for the AYOL Center, a resource center for women and families, with an emphasis on HIV/AIDS and STD prevention, human trafficking, and reproductive health. The aim of her research was to become familiar with international practices in volunteerism development, strengthen her ability to effectively support the development of grassroots NGOs, and foster a more open society.