Global Trends and the Challenges for Volunteering

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Abstract

Individual countries have unique challenges and issues regarding volunteerism but there are also global trends and patterns that can be discerned. Exploring multinational patterns of civic engagement increases opportunities for identifying worldwide patterns and societal trends affecting volunteerism. Identifying and understanding these trends help government leaders and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) develop common approaches to global issues while creating models that strengthen volunteer efforts worldwide.

Key Words: challenges, global, trends, volunteerism

Global Patterns and Trends

Citizen participation takes many forms and has varying degrees of support around the world. Yet there are trends, issues, and challenges that cross national boundaries and affect volunteers in all sectors and all settings. Drawing on volunteering patterns from nine geographic regions of the world, six patterns have emerged that affect volunteering worldwide. They are:

1. concern for the effects of time pressures on individuals;

2. variations in the definition and value of volunteering from country to country;

3. demographic changes and volunteer programs that concentrate on the extremes of the age continuum;

4. the importance for pluralistic approaches to recruitment, engagement, and management;

5. a recognition of the role and importance of reciprocity, community, social solidarity, and citizenship; and

6. the role of information technology in volunteering.

The Effects of Time Pressures

There are persistent issues about the time available to individuals for volunteering. In countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, there are concerns about volunteer burnout as individuals attempt to fill an increasing demand for volunteer services. Pressures to balance personal and professional lives lead to tensions about the use of personal time. Time given to volunteering is erroneously viewed as time taken away from family and friends. Time is regarded as a disappearing commodity to be used judicially and sparingly. While the value for volunteering increases in importance, the time available for volunteering is seen as decreasing. This view of shrinking time is affected by generational differences, life-stage cycles, and socioeconomic conditions. Students and youth tend to give above average time to volunteer service viewing it as an opportunity to be engaged, to build skills, or to fulfill educational requirements. Young families, on the other hand, often devote less time to volunteering, being more engaged in family and work activities. Middle-aged workers and those approaching retirement

deal with increasing workplace demands and the pressures of employment and economic security.

In developing countries, the reality of life pressures necessitates limited time commitment to volunteering as individuals struggle to earn a living, support families, and maintain basic living standards. These individuals may have less flexibility between work and personal time. Informal volunteering prevails in many societies, and the service offered is tailored to individual time availability.

Understanding and recognizing the wide variations of available time require structuring work to maximize opportunities for broad participation without placing undue burdens or expectations on individuals. Formalized volunteer schemes that offer options for flexible time commitments, promoting short and long term assignments, recognize that time is a precious commodity in contemporary society. Additionally, there is a need to adjust for life cycles in volunteering by creating, for example, family options or intergenerational opportunities to promote seasons of service that adjust to changing life pressures and situations.

Variations in the Definition and Value of Volunteering
The definition of volunteering and the use of the term *volunteer* vary within and between countries and settings. Volunteering, at different times and in different places, is used to (a) define the setting of work, such as formal or informal; (b) define the value of work; and/or (c) define the scope of work, such as reaching out beyond the confines of employment and normal responsibilities or performing activities that benefit others.

Safrit and Merrill (1995) identified the four defining tenants of volunteering:

1. Volunteerism implies active involvement. The act of volunteering involves active participation or contributions of time, energies or talents; it is never seen as the giving of financial or material resources as a donor/sponsor.

2. Volunteering is uncoerced. Individuals give of their time, energies and talents freely and for whatever motivation(s).

3. Volunteering is not (primarily) motivated by financial gain. Many programs reimburse volunteers for personal and material expenses incurred during their service. These financial remunerations have been termed reimbursement, stipend or living expenses, but never salary. They are supplemental and not the main motivation for volunteering.

4. Volunteering focuses on the common good. Although reasons for volunteering may be individualized and perhaps even self-serving, the outcomes of volunteering are focused beyond the individual towards a larger, common good.

In 1999 the United Nations Volunteers identified three defining characteristics: (1) volunteering is done by choice, (2) without monetary reward, and (3) for the benefit of the community.

There is not, however, a globally applied definition of volunteering. In some societies, volunteering is viewed as work done to help others with no concern for monetary gain while other societies view volunteer work as a form of low-wage employment or a means to more substantial employment. There may be no distinction between low-paid or non-paid work. In some settings, volunteer

initiatives are promoted as pre-employment or job entry work. Volunteering may be synonymous with civic engagement, public advocacy, and citizenship; or it may be viewed as a social service delivery system. In some instances, programs that provide living stipends for international or national service are referred to as volunteer programs. Service-learning strategies and court-referral programs with mandated service requirements are also sometimes erroneously equated with volunteer work. Volunteering becomes a catch phrase for a wide range of activities that leads to a critical and consequential misunderstanding of the meaning and value of volunteering in society.

The differences in the value placed on volunteer activities are based on the understanding of the term and the perceived value of the work performed. Efforts to use monetary valuation techniques to apply a dollar value to the work of volunteers or to include volunteer service in gross national product figures ignore intrinsic values and costs associated with volunteering. Calculating dollar estimates, based on economic models, diminishes the importance of its social capital. It fails to present the accurate value of reciprocity, connectivity, participation, and citizenship. The danger of using monetary models is that it reduces volunteer work to a single dimension, equating paid work with volunteer service. This fails to value the community building, citizenship development, mutual aid, skills building, personal growth, and self-esteem that occur through volunteer actions. A more comprehensive view would include determining outcomes of the work and defining the social capital of these outcomes.

Demographic Changes and Volunteer Programs that Concentrate on the Extremes of the Age Continuum

Demographic changes are forcing volunteer programs to concentrate on both extremes of the age continuum. In the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and some Asian Pacific countries, demographic patterns reflect an aging population with the prediction that increasing numbers of people will live a third or more of their lives in retirement. This prediction, coupled with the large post World War II population entering retirement in the next decade, creates an emphasis on volunteer programs designed to not only serve but also engage retired and senior populations. In contrast, Mexico, Armenia, and other developing countries have a high percentage of people under the age of 25. In these countries, the emphasis is to create volunteer programs that engage young people. Such programs are viewed as opportunities to both instill an ethic of service in a new generation and promote the ideals of character and skill development, career exploration, and work experience/exposure. In the Eastern block countries, volunteerism is promoted among youth as a strategy for building citizenship and promoting democracy.

Concentrating on the extremes of the age continuum draws young people into volunteering and extends opportunities into later life when individuals are relatively free from the work and family pressures that compete for their time in mid life.

Importance for Pluralistic Approaches to Recruitment, Engagement, and Management

The challenges of multicultural societies, the role of service recipients as service providers, the gap between the rich and the poor, the inclusion of persons with disabilities, and the increase/decrease in

faith-based volunteering illustrate the growing need to accommodate increased diversity. This challenge requires greater emphasis on the development of pluralistic approaches to volunteer recruitment, engagement, and management. Volunteer programs should not be the exclusive realms of the affluent or well educated; volunteerism is a truly inclusive activity. Individuals with diverse backgrounds, skills, and abilities can come together to work cooperatively on issues of common interest. Programs must recognize the importance of engaging people from all sectors of society to synergistically foster social change. Communities and individuals benefit when citizens work together without regard for ethnic, gender, racial, religious, social, and age differences. Programs can be designed to increase opportunities for youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, minorities, and other marginalized groups. These targeted efforts promote pluralism, strengthen social capital within the country, and increase the capacity of society to make a lasting impact on social issues and community-based goals.

Recognition of the Role and Importance of Reciprocity, Community, Social Solidarity, and Citizenship
Volunteering promotes reciprocity, community, social solidarity, and citizenship. It is an effective venue for fostering civil society and building (or rebuilding) social capital. Volunteering fosters the development of social bonds that bridge ideological differences and bring diverse and isolated individuals together. The value of volunteering extends beyond the actual act of service to helping communities become more participatory and cohesive and to nurturing the development of democratic principles.

Measuring the impact of volunteering is a complex task because the results are multidimensional, with anticipated and unanticipated outcomes. Narrow measurements that focus on a single dimension - such as dollar evaluations, return on investment ratios, impact on organizations, impact on volunteers, or impact on users - provide incomplete analysis when taken individually. True assessment of the value of volunteering takes into account the impact on the community and the role of volunteering in developing solidarity and citizenship and provides a much more comprehensive picture of the value of volunteering.

Role of Information Technology in Volunteering
Technology has the potential to create new forms of networking and social connectedness as well as the potential to increase isolation and consolidate ideological differences. When viewed as a tool that can increase efficiency and effectiveness, it can minimize the barriers of time availability, geographic boundaries, and physical limitations. Through volunteerism, the Internet bridges social capital and creates new opportunities for communication, participation, and connectedness.

The Internet crosses borders to expand knowledge and opportunity. Global information networks provide opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing and the exchange of ideas and resources. Virtual networks raise awareness about issues and trends. Professionalization increases as skilled managers of volunteers span time, distance, and cultural barriers to share knowledge about systems, structures, and roles that support effective volunteer programs.

Online volunteer referral services link skills with opportunities as volunteers from anywhere in the world connect with NGOs seeking specific skills and expertise. Online volunteering programs increase availability and flexibility for volunteers so that they work across geographic and time boundaries. Technology increases communication options as well as access to resources and training for volunteers. Technology enriches the fabric of community by engaging new, diverse volunteers in activities and actions that previously were limited to those with physical access to the volunteer site. The Internet provides instant access to emerging problems, crisis situations, helping networks, and community resources. It allows volunteers to monitor disasters, mobilize assistance, and coordinate volunteer efforts. Volunteers can share personal stories, engage others, and build communities of support.

Access to technology continues to expand, but many communities continue to be limited by slow, intermittent, or lack of connectivity to the Internet. Equipment and expertise vary. But community availability continues to increase; and the potential of technology as a tool to decrease barriers, expand communication, and link to resources continues to grow.

Conclusion
Time, meaning, value, demographics, pluralism, solidarity, and technology are affecting volunteerism across many countries. Exploring these global patterns helps organizations anticipate the future and develop local solutions, while creating models that strengthen volunteer efforts worldwide. As volunteering continues to play a vital role in building a civil society and caring communities, leaders must continue to assess and address the universal challenges of volunteering in contemporary society.

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About the Author

Until her death in February 2006, Mary Merrill, LSW, was an internationally respected expert in nonprofit management and volunteerism. A licensed social worker, Mary was Editor of the *Journal of Volunteer Administration* and adjunct faculty at The Ohio State University. Mary helped establish the first volunteer center in Russia, worked with developing NGOs in Armenia, developed a corporate volunteerism model in Mexico City, and worked as a consultant for the United Nations Volunteer Program. During a lifetime dedicated to citizen action, volunteerism, and the volunteer administration profession, Mary taught and consulted in 15 countries and throughout North America.