

## The Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit: What Difference Does Volunteering Make?

Joanna Stuart

Head of Research, Institute for Volunteering Research  
Regents Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London, N1 9RL, UK  
Tel. + 44 (0)207 520 8911 \* Fax + 44 (0)207 520 8910 \*  
E-mail: joanna.stuart@volunteeringengland.org

### Abstract

*With the growing interest and increasing demand for volunteer-involving organizations to monitor, measure, and document the impact and benefit of volunteer programs, the Institute for Volunteering Research developed the Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit in late 2004 to help organizations undertake their own research to assess the impacts of volunteering. Providing a framework and set of tools for managers of volunteers, the toolkit has been used to inform the development and improvement of volunteer programs and to provide evidence for funders on the benefits of volunteering for volunteers themselves, volunteer organizations and their staff, service users, and the wider community. This article introduces the toolkit, discusses how it can be used, and identifies some of the challenges of assessing the impacts of volunteering.*

### Key Words:

evaluation, impact, assessment, benefits, human capital, social capital

### Introduction

For some time, managers of volunteer resources have been under growing pressure to demonstrate the impact and benefits of volunteer programs socially and economically (Anderson & Zimmerer, 2003; Gaskin, 1999; Gaskin & Dobson, 1996; Hager & Brudney, 2005; Rabiner et al., 2003; Safrit & Merrill, 1998; Safrit, Schmiesing, King, Villard, & Wells, 2003). They are increasingly being called upon to evidence the difference volunteers are making, with demands for volunteer involving organizations to become more effective, efficient and transparent (Ellis & Gregory, 2008; Kendall & Knapp, 1996). The impetus for this is coming from a number of different directions both within and outside volunteer-involving organizations, including from “funders, public sector bodies charged with regulating them, individual employees, donors, service users, and by volunteers themselves” (Ellis Paine, 2000, p. 2). Few volunteer

organizations are able to ignore the growing chorus of demands to demonstrate value, impact, and benefit of volunteerism.

To help organizations respond to these demands to measure and demonstrate the impact of their volunteering programs, the Institute for Volunteering Research in the United Kingdom developed the Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit. Published in late 2004, the Toolkit provides guidance and tools to enable managers of volunteers to assess the impact of volunteering within their organization. The actual Toolkit may be accessed at <https://ecommerce.volunteering.org.uk/PublicationDetails.aspx?ProductID=V309>. This article explores the foundations of the Toolkit, how it has been used and some of the challenges of carrying out volunteering impact assessments within organizations.

### The Toolkit's Framework

The Toolkit takes a relatively simple approach to assessing impact. First, it

identifies the main stakeholders affected by volunteering, including volunteers, the organization, the users/beneficiaries of the volunteerism; and the wider community. It then looks to classify the key ways these stakeholders might be impacted by volunteering. Considering the vast number of potential benefits (and drawbacks) of volunteering, the Toolkit categorises these impacts into five key areas or “capitals” to represent a stock of something which might be accumulated over time. These capitals are defined as:

- Economic capital: financial or economic effects of volunteering (e.g., improved employment prospects for volunteers);
- Physical capital: products or outputs of volunteering (e.g., increased quantity and quality of services provided by an organization through involving volunteers);
- Human capital: personal development and skills accrued as a result of volunteering (e.g., new skills developed by volunteers);
- Social capital: relationships, networks and trust developed through volunteering (e.g., the forming of friendships between volunteers and service users); and
- Cultural capital: the sense of cultural and religious identity and understanding developed through volunteering (e.g., a better understanding among staff within an organization of different faiths and cultures as a result of volunteer involvement).

The Toolkit encourages managers of volunteers to consider the broad range of impacts volunteers could have and to then decide which stakeholder groups and impacts are priorities to measure. Thinking about the different capitals helps to

categorize impacts in a logical, structured, and useful way while also ensuring that less obvious benefits (such as the impact of volunteering on cultural identity) are not forgotten. To illustrate, Figure 1 shows some of the potential impacts of volunteering on volunteers under each of the five capitals. For each stakeholder group, there are series of tools including questionnaires and focus group topic guides which are designed to reflect the five capitals. For example, if a manager of volunteers wanted to ask service users what impact volunteering had on them, they would find specific questionnaires and other tools that may can be adapted (a CD Rom with all of the tools is provided in the toolkit). The questionnaires use a five- point attitudinal scale to reflect potential positive and negative impacts and changes of volunteering. Figure 2 shows an example of questions that could be used with volunteers to measure human capital assets. Once a manager of volunteers has identified which stakeholders and impacts to focus upon, the Toolkit guides them through (1) possible methods and tools that could be used in conducting the impact assessment, (2) how to conduct the assessment, and (3) how to analyse the results, and ultimately provides suggestions of how to present and disseminate the results.

### **Using the Toolkit**

Volunteer involving organizations have used the Toolkit for a number of different (and often, multiple) purposes. Most commonly, managers of volunteers have drawn on the results of impact assessments to inform the development of their volunteering programs and to provide evidence on the impact of volunteering to existing or potential funders. Commenting on this, one manager of volunteers who has used the toolkit to assess the impact of volunteering in their hospice recently noted, “We had never done anything to measure

our services on the voluntary side. There was lots of feeling that we provided a good service, that it was well supported and well thought of but there was nothing measurable.” Similar comments have been made by other managers of volunteers who have recognised the need to demonstrate in a more systematic and transparent way the difference volunteering is making. Commenting on their use of the toolkit, one

Volunteer Centre manager said, “It’s enabled us to have some hard statistics to back up the things we’ve always said but it’s also opened our eyes to things we didn’t know.” Other organizations have used the results of their volunteering impact assessments to provide feedback to volunteers, to recruit new volunteers, and to raise the profile of their program and organization.

Figure 1. Potential impacts of volunteering on volunteers using the five capitals framework

<b>Economic Capital</b>	<b>Physical Capital</b>	<b>Human Capital</b>	<b>Social Capital</b>	<b>Cultural Capital</b>
The economic benefits and costs of volunteering to volunteers	Products/outputs gained by volunteers	Personal development and skills gained by volunteers	Social relationships, networks and trusts developed by volunteers	Development of cultural and religious identity and understanding by volunteers
<b>Specific examples of possible impacts on volunteers</b>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to free training</li> <li>• Increased earning power</li> <li>• Financial costs through being out of pocket</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training courses</li> <li>• Social events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased confidence and self esteem</li> <li>• Increased skills base</li> <li>• Improved health and well being</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased contacts and networks</li> <li>• Increased sense of trust in others</li> <li>• Increased involvement in local activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased sense of community, faith or religious identity</li> <li>• Increased participation in cultural activities</li> </ul>

Figure 2. Sample Toolkit questions assessing potential human capital

**2. Listed below are some of the ways that people gain personally from being a volunteer. Have any of the following increased or decreased for you? Please tick the box that applies to you.**

	A Increased greatly	B Increased	C Stayed the same	D Decreased	E Decreased greatly	F Not relevant
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 2px solid red; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; margin-right: 5px;"></div> <div> <p>a) My personal development (e.g. confidence, self-esteem, self-management)</p> </div> </div>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 2px solid red; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; margin-right: 5px;"></div> <div> <p>b) My skills-base (e.g. from teamwork through to computer literacy)</p> </div> </div>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="border: 2px solid red; border-radius: 50%; width: 20px; height: 20px; margin-right: 5px;"></div> <div> <p>c) My general health and well-being</p> </div> </div>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Issues and Challenges

Undertaking volunteering impact assessments is not without challenges. The Toolkit aims to save managers of volunteer resources and time by providing guidance and templates which can be taken and adapted. However, the exercise can be time intensive, and it may be necessary to take a piecemeal approach to impact assessment. Rather than try to assess the impact of volunteering on every stakeholder in one attempt, volunteer organizations may look to undertake their assessments gradually over time. Managers of volunteers are encouraged to integrate impact assessments into volunteer programs (and build in resources accordingly) rather than they being an add-on, ad hoc exercise.

It is also vital for organizations to learn from volunteering impact assessments and understand that they are not merely an exercise to be undertaken to satisfy funders and regulators. Organizations that have used the Toolkit have been able to utilize the results of impact assessments to improve programs as well as to demonstrate to volunteers, service users, and the wider community the impact of their programs.

### References

- Anderson, P.M., & Zimmerer, M.E. (2003). Dollar value of volunteer time: A review of five estimation methods. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 21(2), 39-44.
- Ellis, J., & Gregory, T. (2008). *Developing monitoring and evaluation in the third sector: Research report*. London: Charities Evaluation Service
- Ellis Paine, A. (2000, December). *Measuring the impacts of volunteering: A total audit discussion paper*. London: Institute for Volunteering Research.
- Gaskin, K. (1999). *V.I.V.A. in Europe: A comparative study of the volunteer investment and value audit*. London: Institute for Volunteering Research.
- Gaskin, K., & Dobson, B. (1996). *The economic equation of volunteering: A pilot study: Final report*. Loughborough, UK: Centre for Research in Social Policy, University of Loughborough.
- Hager, M.A., & Brudney, J.L. (2005). Net benefits: Weighing the challenges and benefits of volunteers. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 23(1), 26-31.
- Institute for Volunteering Research. (2004). *Volunteering impact assessment toolkit*. London: Author.
- Kendall, J., & Knapp, M. (1996). *The voluntary sector in the UK*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Murphy, S. (2002). The social impact of volunteers internationally. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 20(4), 5-13.
- Rabiner, D.J., Scheffler, S., Koetse, E., Palermo, J., Ponzi, E., Burt, S., & Hampton, L. (2003). The impact of the Senior Companion program on quality of life outcomes for frail older adults. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, 21(2), 17-23.
- Safrit, R.D., & Merrill, M. (1998). Assessing the impact of volunteer programs. *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*, XVI(4), 5-10.

Safrit, R.D., Schmiesing, R., King, J.E.,  
Villard, J., & Wells, B. (2003).  
Assessing the impact of the three-  
year Ohio Teen B.R.I.D.G.E.S.

AmeriCorps program. *The Journal  
of Volunteer Administration*, 21(2),  
12-16.

---

#### **About the Author**

Joanna Stuart is Head of Research at the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) in the UK. She is primarily involved in managing and undertaking research on volunteering, including most recently a large scale study exploring the capacity of organisations to involve and manage volunteers. Joanna leads the Institute's volunteering impact assessment work, providing training and support to organisations looking to measure the impact of volunteering. Before joining IVR, Joanna worked with the University of Westminster in the UK as a Research Fellow on issues relating to social exclusion and community participation in decision-making.