

Policy brief on volunteering, its effects and circumstances

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ITSSOIN

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1. Introduction

Volunteers are a crucial resource for third sector organizations. They provide not only an important portion of the labour force available to third sector organizations, but also ideas and networks that can help third sector organizations become more innovative and effective.

This policy brief outlines the research questions and presents the insights gained on volunteering in Work Package 3 of the ITSSOIN project, led by VU University Amsterdam. We conclude with a discussion of interventions that can enhance volunteering and the value of volunteers for social innovation in third sector organizations.

The key questions we sought to answer in the ITSSOIN research project on volunteering are the following:

1. Why do people volunteer? Which motivations do volunteers cite for their engagement in third sector organizations? How can these motivations be used to enhance volunteering? How are third sector organizations and volunteering activities perceived by citizens in Europe? To answer these questions, we conducted a literature review of research on enabling factors and conditions that hinder engagement in the third sector in terms of volunteering, including public perceptions and attitudes of citizens towards the third sector.
2. How can the impact of third sector activities be measured? To answer this question, we provided a critical review of research reporting on the impact of volunteering. We focused on the validity and reliability of methods currently used to assess the impact of third sector activities. We conclude with a recommendation on how to estimate this impact.
3. What is the impact of third sector activities on participants? To answer this question, we analysed data from longitudinal panel surveys to estimate the impact of volunteering on the welfare of participants, using the insights gained earlier. We identified characteristics of participation that influence the impact and compare the impact between countries.
4. How can the breadth and impact of third sector activities be enhanced? How do third sector organizations manage volunteers? How can volunteers be managed in such a way that their motivation is enhanced? To answer these questions, we conducted interviews with volunteer managers and current and former volunteers. We describe the practices that facilitate the recruitment, productivity and retention of volunteers in third sector organizations.

2. Why do people volunteer?

Across different countries in Europe, volunteering is commonly defined as unpaid work for a non-profit organization (Bekkers & De Wit, 2014). While the terminology, the tone of the public debate and opinions on the value of volunteering clearly differ between countries, volunteering is recognized as a form of civic engagement separate from informal helping and support for friends and family.

Research on volunteering has a long history in the social sciences because it is viewed as an indicator of social cohesion. Volunteering is an intensive form of participation in third sector organizations, more so than passive membership or donating. Current research on volunteering is dispersed over many disciplines. We categorized the body of research as answers provided to two types of questions:

- A. Who volunteers? This type of research shows how demographic, economic, social and psychological characteristics of volunteers differ from those of non-volunteers;
- B. Why do people volunteer? This type of research shows how volunteering choices vary between circumstances in people's lives, between organizations and over time.

Generally speaking, reviews of the literature on volunteering ((Boezeman & Ellemers, 2014; Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Musick and Wilson, 2008; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin & Schroeder, 2005; Smith, 1994; Wilson, 2012) show that volunteering tends to be more common among individuals who are native citizens, who are older, who are married, have children, who have a higher level of education, who have paid employment (especially part-time), own their homes, who are actively religious, who are children of volunteers and are in better health. The evidence on gender differences in volunteering is mixed. Three strands of theories on characteristics of volunteers can be distinguished: (1) social theories about the effects of context, roles, and integration; (2) individual characteristic theories about values, traits, and motivations; and (3) resource theories about skills and free time.

Research on volunteering from the perspective of third sector organizations (Brodie, Cowling, Nissen, Paine, Jochum, & Warburton, 2009; Studer & Von Schnurbein, 2013) shows that volunteers tend to be more satisfied with their volunteering experience when they receive training, support, and recognition from the organization, when they have more freedom of choice in their work and face less bureaucracy or at least when the expectations of the organization are clear. A match between volunteers' tasks and their preferences is related to higher satisfaction. Also equality and mutual respect between volunteers and paid workers are related to a positive volunteer experience. Cultivation of a volunteer role-identity by providing recognition items such as t-shirts and participation in decision-making are positively related to the level of identification with the organization.

For many practical purposes research characteristics of volunteers and third sector organizations is less informative than research on why people volunteer. It is important to recognize how volunteering activities change within individuals over time because the same individual can start and stop volunteering, and intensify or reduce her level of

activity. The same holds for changes within third sector organizations. Organizations looking for ways to reduce barriers and facilitate volunteering benefit most from insights on the effects of circumstances, especially of circumstances that are amenable to change.

We present eight mechanisms that may explain why volunteering varies between circumstances and over time:

1. Awareness of need;
2. Solicitation (being asked);
3. Costs and benefits (of a material nature);
4. Altruism (concern for recipients);
5. Reputation (social rewards);
6. Psychological costs and benefits;
7. Values (social and political attitudes);
8. Efficacy (perceived impact).

The eight mechanisms are also helpful in explaining some of the variance in volunteering behaviour between individuals and organizations. The mechanisms help us to understand why volunteering is more widespread in some social groups than in others, why citizens with specific personality characteristics are more or less likely to volunteer, and why volunteers in some organizations are more satisfied, committed and loyal than in others.

3. How to estimate the impact of volunteering?

A sizeable literature dispersed over multiple disciplines in health and life sciences, the social and behavioural sciences, both applied and fundamental, has sought to estimate the welfare impacts of volunteering on individual volunteers. In a critical review of the methodology of this literature (Bekkers & Verkaik, 2015) we have classified the quality of the evidence with respect to the possibilities for causal inference. In short, many studies fail to adequately pin down causality, leaving room for alternative interpretations. These alternatives include:

- the possibility of reverse causality – i.e. the correlation between volunteering and welfare reflecting a causal influence of welfare on volunteering rather than vice versa;
- the possibility of spurious relationships – i.e. the correlation between volunteering and welfare being the result of other, unmeasured (‘omitted’) variables.

We present a hierarchy of research methods that allow for more stringent causal inferences. Among the top 33 studies on the welfare impacts of volunteering, only 2 used the best method of a randomized control trial (RCT). The remainder of the studies used either quasi-experimental or cross-sectional survey methods.

In our review we have outlined four strategies that may increase the likelihood of demonstrating causal influences of volunteering on welfare. The first strategy is to analyse change over time within individuals rather than comparing groups of individuals at one moment in time. The second strategy is to control statistically for confounding factors. The third strategy is to identify conditions that moderate the impact of participation. The fourth strategy is to use multiple measures of impact, from different sources. The fifth strategy is to construct measures of impact from multiple indicators.

4. Welfare impacts

What is the impact of third sector activities on the welfare of participants? Volunteering has been argued to have many benefits for citizens, four of which were tested in ITSSOIN (De Wit, Bekkers, Verkaik & Karamat Ali (2015):

1. Volunteering is expected to improve *subjective well-being* as a result of the ‘warm glow’ of being involved in prosocial behaviour (Aknin et al., 2013);
2. Volunteering is expected to increase the size, diversity and quality of *social networks* because volunteers meet new people, expanding their social circle of friends, acquaintances and professional ties;
3. Volunteering is expected to improve *self-perceived health*, following a large body of literature on supposed mental and physical health benefits of doing voluntary work (Bekkers, Konrath & Smith, 2014).
4. Volunteering is expected to improve the network, skills and self-confidence that are beneficial for one’s professional *career*. Also, volunteers are expected to be better able to cope with ageing and to stay in the labour market even when reaching the retirement age.

By analysing data from longitudinal panel surveys, we provided evidence on the effects of volunteering that estimates causal processes with considerable validity. We used datasets from different countries to test our theoretical expectations in multiple contexts. The analyses were based on 845.733 survey responses from 154.970 different respondents in 6 panel surveys covering 15 countries from the period 1984 - 2011.

We found quite robust positive associations between changes in volunteering and changes in self-perceived health, subjective well-being and social relations. Health, well-being and social relations improve among citizens in Europe after they start volunteering and continue to do so. When citizens stop volunteering, their welfare tends to decline.

The impact on career outcomes is less clear. Findings from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the Giving in the Netherlands Panel Survey (GINPS) and the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) point to a substitution effect between volunteering and paid work. In these countries, volunteering activities seem to

replace paid work. In Switzerland, however, we find that people who start volunteering are more likely to find a job.

The analyses thus support the hypothesis that volunteering improves health, subjective well-being and social relationships. The hypothesis that volunteering benefits careers must be rejected. The magnitude of the impact of volunteering on well-being is small. On average, the increase in subjective health and subjective well-being benefit due to changes in volunteering is about 1%.

These estimates are much smaller than the average difference in well-being between volunteers and non-volunteers because well-being influences decisions to become engaged in volunteering and to remain active. Thus, selection processes are responsible for at least 70% of the difference in well-being between volunteers and non-volunteers. Most of the outcome variables turned out to be quite stable over time, so changes in one's life cycle like entering or leaving voluntary work do not have a large impact on one's health, well-being, career or social relations. A failure to take selection processes and the stability of well-being into account leads to gross overestimation of the welfare impact of volunteering.

In sum, voluntary engagement does enhance people's welfare, but we should not expect miracles from participation in third sector activities.

5. How can third sector organizations enhance volunteering?

In the final part of the ITSSOIN work package on volunteering (De Wit, Mensink, Einarsson & Bekkers, 2015) we focused on organisational perspectives to answer the question how the breadth and impact of third sector activities can be enhanced. Third sector organisations have different means to facilitate volunteering. Which organisational characteristics hinder and facilitate the recruitment, retention and productivity of participants in third sector organisations? We also examined to what extent third sector organisations that work with volunteers perceive their mission as innovative, how volunteers contribute to social innovations and how organisations try to increase those contributions.

We conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with 17 volunteer managers, 5 volunteers, 1 former volunteer, and 6 other professionals in six different countries. Respondents were selected in large service provision organisations in the field of social services and large advocacy organisations in the field of environment across ITSSOIN countries. Additionally, we carried out in-depth analyses of refugee organisations in the Netherlands and a sports association in Sweden.

From our interviews the insight emerges that volunteer management policies are a matter of resources, priority, and power hierarchy. While many large third sector organisations have a written or unwritten volunteer policy, some organisations do not have a central policy because (1) they do not have the time to write policy documents,

(2) they do not aim to work with many volunteers, or (3) they deliberately choose to leave autonomy to regional or local groups.

We found that third sector organizations employ a wide range of strategies to recruit, retain, motivate and mobilise volunteers. It is striking that some organisations recruit and motivate volunteers just by doing relevant work. The brand recognition and appealing campaigns of Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are examples of activities that attract volunteers without this being a primary goal.

Although social innovation is not explicitly part of the routines and terminology in the third sector, all third sector organisations we interviewed provided examples of social innovation in their work. Innovations are often a reaction on developments in society, like economic crises and government policies, that induce changes in the social needs organisations are working on. The role of volunteers in the emergence of these innovations seems to a facilitating one. Innovations are mostly initiated by professionals, although more decentralised organisations leave more room for bottom-up initiatives. Volunteers are almost always involved, but the coordination of new projects mostly remains at (the headquarters of) the organisation.

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