

## **Third Sector Commentary: 'Improving and Proving Volunteering, from a Practitioner's Perspective', Keith Nicholson**

This review looks at the wide and deep subject of volunteering. A subject close to my heart and a one which Third Sector organizations of any size will have an interest in. The three papers discussed varied in style, geographical coverage and focus, however, help us develop our understanding of volunteering. Reading these works made me reflect on the typologies of organisations I come across in my journey around the Third Sector, from tiny to small, small to medium, medium to large, and a final superlative size. These typologies could be explored further in the context of volunteering and presented many different perspectives on issues of volunteering.

In many ways volunteering is the lifeblood of the sector and from my experience, treatment reflects effort. If you take time to resource the recruitment, training and management of volunteers, they add a huge amount to organizations. The three papers discussed will help us explore this further.

I recently completed a bid for a national government department, happy not to name it but one of those which begins, Department of... The bid was the usual comprehensive set of questions about how a project might meet their needs in funding projects of a national significance. The bid was going great, but ended in a question which took me quite by surprise. It asked to describe how the bid would meet the aims of the Big Society. For a moment, I thought I had gone back a good few years in time, and I was struck by how much the Big Society as a concept, does not get discussed. During the most recent election, it was a bedrock of how cuts were framed nationally and for us in the Third Sector how it was to be the panacea of funding social enterprise to manage public services and opening up the market for the Third Sector.

The paper "'The Big Society,' Public Expenditure, and Volunteering' by Koen P. R. Bartels, Guido Cozzi and Noemi Mantovan (2013) helps us explore this in a bit more detail and examine if less public spending leads more people into volunteering by creating a 'strong

*crowding-out effect* to counter the cuts in public spending: that is, an increase (decrease) in public expenditure brings about a significant decrease (increase) in citizens' propensity to volunteer.' (Bartels, K. P. R., Cozzi, G. and Mantovan, N., 2013). I found the paper a really interesting analysis of this assertion and it brings in a look at the economic modelling of public spending and volunteering; employed and non-employed volunteers and their motivations for volunteering; an econometric analysis; USA/Europe/UK comparisons and a narrative analysis.

The paper really gives a good account of this type of analysis and surmised that government expenditure 'has to be tailored to sustaining local abilities and volunteering infrastructure so that employed individuals will consider voluntary work as worth allocating their time to.' (Bartels, K. P. R., Cozzi, G. and Mantovan, N., 2013). The paper describes how government needs to work alongside the sector and the individuals to support local partnerships and motivate volunteers appropriately.

How does this help us usefully frame our thinking about volunteering? Well for one, it helps us better contextualise the political rhetoric around volunteering, dressed up as Big Society or whatever – the key message we should be listening out for is around support for local infrastructure and appropriately motivating volunteers. A very common sense approach.

In the paper, 'The Third-party Model: Enhancing Volunteering through Governments, Corporations and Educational Institutes', by Debbie Haski-Leventhal, Lucas C. P. M. Meijis and Lesley Hustinx (2010) helps us frame this wider infrastructure support idea further, bringing in educational institutions as additional spaces to consider providing support, opportunities and motivations for volunteers. The paper takes a wider view of the policies of the Western countries and examines how volunteering is such an important part of developing social capital and a civil society.

The paper briefly touches on some of the negative aspects of volunteering, namely reinforcing the difference between those better off and able to devote disposable time to

helping others as well as allowing governments to withdraw basic provision for citizens and in organisations not recruiting volunteers effectively from all sections of society. The paper takes an overall positive view of volunteering though, countering with the United Nations' support and the emerging corporate and educational institutions. The paper defines three actors in volunteering, the volunteers, the volunteer organisations and the clients. The paper then uses the phrase Third Parties to 'advance a new theoretical framework, 'the third-party model', which observes the ways in which political leaderships, corporations and educational institutes (seek to) enhance volunteering.' (Debbie Haski-Leventhal, Lucas C. P. M. Meijs and Lesley Hustinx, 2010) It uses volunteerability (Meijs et al., 2006a, 2006b) and recruitability to frame the discussion.

After spending some time setting the scene with these motivating factors, the paper delves into examining the Corporate, Government and Educational Institutions as actors and comprehensively details a discussion. Despite the article being very comprehensive in its discussion and providing a very clear conceptual framework, I would have loved to have seen a piece of further work which involved practically focussed frameworks for those institutions to act of some of this sound thinking. Not having to deal with administration and bureaucracy, volunteers, more than paid workers, can focus on direct services and free the professional staff to achieve other objectives and goals clients, especially from socially excluded groups, such as in distress youth. Service users, more than paid workers, prefer to receive services from volunteers and see them as altruists (Ronel et al., 2008) and I find that the authors' insight is very useful in helping me approach organisations with an understanding of what would benefit them in using or providing volunteers.

Our final paper, 'Volunteering and Volunteers: Benefit-Cost Analyses' by Femida Handy and Laurie Mook brings a numbers based approach to volunteering by looking at benefits-costs at both organisational and individual levels. The work is very interesting overall in that it makes a great deal of common sense, however, practical implementation might be limited for some of their thoughts. The work brings a USA flavour to the trilogy of papers and I am not sure how differences in volunteering manifest themselves between say the UK and the USA other than I have a personal perception that the USA may enjoy a more active

volunteering population. The paper firstly examines volunteering benefits and costs from an individual perspective, covering a lot of ground from altruism through to warm glow, status, skills, training, and other private benefits. The authors' cost analyses are comprehensive and begin to introduce some data through the comparison of volunteers versus paid staff in a Hospital environment, estimated at \$4,763 (Handy, F., Mook, L., & Quarter, J., 2006).

The paper then moves on to the organizational perspective, considering how organizations might make choices about recruiting, accepting, training and managing volunteers, in other words meeting demand. One example presents the costs to an organization of using volunteers at \$2.62 per hour of volunteering but actually the perceptions around having volunteers represent the organization attributed benefits difficult to value. In spite of the many tangible and intangible benefits generated by volunteers as "good will generated by their presence, their service as ambassadors to the public, and enhancement of community relations" are not without costs (Handy, Mook & Quarter, 2006).

The paper provides an in-depth case study in a social accounting type analysis, for an anonymous community service organization providing meals and services. The social accounting was very neatly described and felt like a coherent approach building on the conceptual picture presented already by the authors, presenting us with a Comparative Value Added Statement. The statement combined a social and financial value columns to present an overall set of surrogate information. The paper concludes by saying that 'Social accounting models can help make visible and count what is vital in terms of non-profit organizational performance. However, what is important is not the perfect indicators or the perfect evaluation methods, but rather an understanding that benefits and costs drive the behaviours of volunteers and organizations.' (Handy, F., Mook, L., & Quarter, J., 2006). However, I rather think that it is time for governments to start actually setting out some key indicators in order that we in the sector can stop dancing around the issue of social value measurement and indicators and start to take it as seriously as they take GDP or GVA.

What right have I to pontificate on all of this? Personally, I volunteer my time with two

charities. One is a national grant making charity which has an excellent sense of governance, funding demonstrable quality and is a learning organisation filled with excellent, highly competent staff which understands where it sits in the funding picture. Another charity I volunteer with is a micro charity based in Morpeth which focusses on doing the best it can around environmental issues and training with six Trustees and zero staff. Both charities have an unspoken emphasis on contributing in terms which are unstated and I am absolutely fine with this.

I'm entirely comfortable with the fact that neither charity is entering the private sector battle nor has an over-reliance on the public sector. Those charities that are, often have difficult internal boundaries and positions and that comes across sometimes to volunteers 'working' on the same role as those getting paid.

Academic rhetoric which poses more questions than it asks is not always helpful to advance practical application of tremendous knowledge and it seems that the role of education institutions, both as drivers of thinking and places of work and study, have an ever increasing willingness to consider their place in volunteering. There is a role for helping people find their motivations and recognising the holistic benefit of volunteering which can support social, societal and career goals.

I feel that the three works presented here really add a sense of depth of understanding and exploration on the topic of volunteering and it makes sense to me to build on this work and turn some of this excellent conceptualisation into practical action which moves us forward as a sector and better recognises and supports the valuable contribution that volunteers make. I look forward to applying some of this thinking in my day to day practice and help others think conceptually about volunteering and its place within the Third Sector and wider Civil Society.

## References

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