

Volunteering in Europe: Opportunities and options for the next decade

Justin Davis Smith

Svensk resumé:

Frivilligt hjälparbete är en viktig ingrediens i ett fritt och civiliserat samhälle och erkännandet av det frivilliga arbetet växer. Man blir mer och mer övertygad om att frivilligt arbete är en viktig komponent i ett industriellt och post-industriellt samhälle.

I England visar en nyligen gjord undersökning att cirka 10 miljoner människor varje vecka bidrar med cirka 100 miljoner timmar frivilligt arbete. Studier i andra länder pekar på liknande siffror. Man bör dock notera att man definierar frivilligt arbete olika i olika länder. Frivilligt arbete är vanligt i hela Europa och det växer i betydelse. Frivilligt hjälparbete växte fram parallellt med industrialiseringen i många länder under 18-hundratalet. Frivilligt hjälparbete var ett av samhällets svar på de sociala skillnaderna som uppstod samtidigt med industrialiseringen.

Frivilligt hjälparbete, liksom många andra aktiviteter, påverkas mycket av det samhälle där det äger rum. Frågan är om det finns någon gemensam förståelse för vad som menas med frivilligt hjälparbete (volunteering).

Definitionen för frivilligt hjälparbete i denna artikel innebär en aktivitet som man tar på sig frivilligt, som inte ger någon ekonomisk ersättning (förutom ersättning för eventuella utgifter i samband med uppgiften), som är till nytta för andra individer i samhället dock inte den frivilliges närmaste familjemedlemmar. Med detta menas såväl direkta hjälpinsatser som att arbeta med att sprida information om en verksamhet eller att arbeta för att få ihop pengar till en frivilligorganisation.

Varför sker det en så snabb upprustning av de frivilliga sektorn i hela Europa

Det går att se åtminstone tre skäl till varför frivilligt arbete blivit viktigare under de senare 5-10 åren. Sam-

hällets service kan inte klara av alla behov som finns av stöd och hjälp.

Möjligheter för framtiden; samarbete eller konflikt?

Vilken typ av stöd behövs frivilliga sektorn för att blomstra i framtiden?

a) Samhället måste på olika sätt stödja frivilligt arbete. Det behövs en infrastruktur som kan underlätta arbetet, t ex en typ av frivilligcentraler dit människor kan anmäla sitt intresse att delta i frivilligt arbete.

b) Det behövs ett förtroligt samarbete mellan staten och de frivilliga för att arbetet skall kunna utvecklas efter olika behov.

c) Det behövs också ett gott samarbete mellan de frivilliga organisationerna och den privata kommersiella sektorn. I förlängningen kan man här se ett samarbete inom europeiska gemenskapen.

d) Frivilligorganisationerna måste göra reklam för sin verksamhet, sälja sitt budskap att frivilligt arbete ger väl så mycket positivt tillbaka till givaren som det är positivt för den som tar emot hjälp.

Möjligheter för frivilligt arbete inom den europeiska gemenskapen?

Konklusion

Det finns en politisk koncensus kring värdet av frivilligorganisationerna och deras arbete. I Väst Europa såväl som i de framväxande demokratierna i Öst och Central Europa arbetar samhällena mot att frivilligorganisationerna skall spela en allt större roll i samhället.

Författaren Dr Justin Davies Smith är forskningschef vid the Volunteer Centre UK Berkhamsted, Eng-

Volunteering is a vital element of free and civilized society, and recognition of its importance is growing. Throughout the continent of Europe, both Eastern and Central regions as well as Western regions, governments and populations at large are waking up to the fact that voluntary activity action has an important role to play in modern industrial and post-industrial society.

Just a few statistics will help illustrate the vitality of volunteering throughout Europe. A recent survey carried out in the United Kingdom suggests that up to half the adult population take part in voluntary work each year, a staggering 23 million people; and that 10 million people volunteer each week giving 100 million hours of help. In France a recent survey suggested that 19% of the population were involved in voluntary work each year, with the average amount of time spent each week somewhere in the region of 4 hours. In the Netherlands surveys have identified 5 million volunteers in a population of just 14 million; and in Northern Italy 3 million people volunteer on a regular basis. And so I could continue. It would be a mistake to try and make firm comparisons between different countries. Volunteering, like so many other activities, is heavily influenced by the society in which it takes place. It is not at all clear that there is even a common European understanding of what constitutes volunteering. Does volunteering refer exclusively to activities undertaken in a formal setting, through a voluntary or non-profit group; or can it also encompass informal, neighbourhood help? Does volunteering include political and campaigning activity or is it confined to the direct provision of services? And what of the field in which volunteering takes place. Is volunteering confined to activity in the social welfare field, or can it also include work undertaken in, for example, the environmental field and in the fields of art and heritage? Different countries define volunteering differently. Yet the important point to note for the purpose of this paper is that volunteering is a common activity throughout Europe and, moreover, is growing in importance. On the question of cross national comparisons I am currently embarking on a major Pan-European study of volunteering in Europe which should add to our understanding of differences and similarities

Volunteering like so many other activities, is heavily influenced by the society in which it takes place

It must be stressed that part of the push for an increased role for the voluntary and volunteer sector was economic

in the organisation and practice of volunteering across the continent.

What do I mean by volunteering? I shall define volunteering in the following way: as an activity freely undertaken, not in return for financial reward (excluding out of pocket expenses) which is for the benefit of individuals or society, other than members of the volunteers' immediate family. Thus I take a broad definition of voluntary work, which encompasses campaigning activity and advocacy, as well as service delivery; which can take place in all fields of human endeavour, not just the social welfare sector; and which can occur in the statutory and private sectors, just as much as in the voluntary or non-profit sector.

I have said that interest in volunteering is growing throughout Europe. However, volunteering is not of course a new phenomenon. There is a rich history of philanthropic activity in Judaeo-Christian societies, and indeed in other societies and cultures as well. In fact it could well be argued that the activity of giving and helping is as old as society itself. However, in most European countries it was during the nineteenth century that volunteering as an organised activity really took off. This trend was noted by the nineteenth century sociologist of democracy, de Tocqueville, who argued that voluntary action was vital to the work of democratic society by acting as a bulwark against excessive state power.

The reasons for the massive expansion of philanthropy during this period are many and varied, according to the country under study, and are beyond the scope of this paper. But one reason can be isolated: voluntary activity rose in parallel with the industrialisation of many societies during the nineteenth century, a process which alongside the creation of enormous wealth and opportunities, also resulted in a massive increase in poverty and alienation for parts of the population. Volunteering was societies response to these problems, in the absence of a statutory response. Such was the scale of the problems caused by the industrial revolution, however, that it soon became apparent that voluntary action alone would be incapable of providing a solution. It was this failure of the voluntary response

which led to demands for increased state intervention, a process which would lead to the state taking the lead in social policy during the next century and to voluntary action taking back seat. The history of volunteering can not be written without reference to the history of statutory provision. It is an issue to which I shall return later in my address.

An Upsurge of Interest in Volunteering

Across Europe interest in volunteering and its role in society has expanded dramatically over the past decade or so. It is possible to identify at least three reasons as to why this is so.

A growing recognition amongst societies with a well established welfare state that statutory provision alone was never going to prove capable of dealing with society's needs. To put it more bluntly - the end of the welfare dream. Part of this was economic. The massive expansion in welfare spending in many countries since the late sixties, combined with mounting economic problems and balance of payments crises, increased pressure to limit welfare expenditure. The voluntary sector and unpaid volunteers were seen as a means of shifting responsibility from the state to the independent sector, thereby saving money. It must be stressed that part of the push for an increased role for the voluntary and volunteer sector was economic. But the shift towards greater reliance on voluntary action was also an ideological one. The late 1980's saw the replacement of social democratic governments across Europe by conservative administrations, keen to increase self reliance and limit state intervention and to roll back the frontiers of the state. In the welfare field and in other policy areas these administrations looked to transfer responsibility for the provision and in some cases the funding of services to the private and voluntary sector. The goal of state welfarism was supplemented in government policy by one of welfare pluralism or the mixed economy of welfare. In the UK and elsewhere public authorities were forced or encouraged to contract out their services to the independent sectors. Volunteering was actively encouraged as a policy goal.

Volunteering was actively encouraged as a policy goal

Voluntary action was not simply a consequence of political liberation

But it would be wrong to conclude that it was only on the Right that ideas of welfare pluralism had taken hold. Since the late sixties there had been growing dissatisfaction on the Left at the performance of welfare services, which were variously accused of being out of touch with users, unresponsive to change and monolithic in character. The late sixties in fact saw the flowering of a new form of voluntary action, more radical in tone, more democratic in orientation, which grew up alongside the more traditional forms of voluntary activity. For the Left voluntary action was to be championed because it brought with it increased participation or empowerment for individuals, because it was an expression of collective, community action. But notwithstanding the fact that the ideological support for voluntary action on the Left was of a very different nature to that on the Right, the fact remains that by the end of the nineteen eighties volunteering in Europe was being championed by groupings of various political persuasion.

Whilst these ideological shifts were taking place in the welfare countries of the West, momentous changes were occurring in the countries of Central and East Europe. Voluntary action had not disappeared during the years of communist rule, contrary to popular belief. For example, it has been estimated that in the former Democratic Republic of Germany, up to 25% of the population were involved in the voluntary sector in any one year. However, such action had been seriously curtailed in the region. The revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe saw a flowering of voluntary groups, partly no doubt as a joyous celebration of new found freedom but also in response to the enormous social and economic problems facing the new nation states. But voluntary action was not simply a consequence of political liberation. Voluntary action, especially through church based groups, had a key role to play in bringing such freedom about. In Poland, in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, voluntary action was a dominant force in the struggle for political liberation. Voluntary activity has continued to flourish in the new political situation, but there have been problems. Shortages of money, of basic resources and of the whole infrastructure of an

independent third sector, have limited expansion. And we should perhaps not be surprised. As one of the leading political theorists of the third sector, Ralph Dahrendorf, has commented: civil society is something that grows rather than is built. Its 'stable and enduring networks' will take years to be created. There is much that Western nations can do to encourage the development of the third sector and of volunteering in Eastern and Central Europe, and through such initiatives as the Charity Know How Fund in the UK, money and experience is being transferred to the region. Such help is to be applauded, but we should be mindful of the dangers of trying to uproot models of the voluntary sector and of voluntary action from one society and transplant them lock stock and barrel to another one. As I said at the beginning, voluntary action takes on different forms in different cultures and societies. And what is the right model of action in one society may not be right in all others.

Options for The Future - Cooperation or conflict?

What of the future? What will be the role of voluntary activity in Europe over the coming decade?

It seems to me that there are two scenarios for the future development of voluntary activity, one more positive than the other.

First, the less positive one. This can be described as a situation where voluntary action is in competition with statutory provision.

This scenario sees voluntary action being championed as an alternative to statutory provision, particularly in the social welfare field, but possibly in other areas as well like the environment, heritage and the arts. Under pressure from economic retrenchment, and imbued with a desire to curtail the state sector, governments may choose to promote voluntary activity as a direct substitute for statutory services. Local authorities will be forced to contract out services to the independent sector. Voluntary organisations will expand their service delivery role and volunteers will be asked to take on roles previously seen as the preserve of the state. State funding of the voluntary sector and the

The rapid rise in unemployment throughout Europe will limit the availability of volunteers

infrastructure of volunteering will be cut. There are dangers to this approach:

The question has to be raised: Has the volunteer sector the capacity to respond to these increased demands? There is some evidence in the UK that despite an increase in volunteers over the past decade, many organisations are still finding it difficult to recruit sufficient new volunteers to take on the increased range of tasks being asked of them.

The question of whether the demand for volunteers is outstripping the supply is an important one. Apart from the political push for an expansion of voluntary effort there are socio-economic factors which are increasing the demand for volunteers. For example, the trend towards an ageing population, which is being experienced throughout Europe. Alongside the rise in numbers of active third age people there will be an increase in numbers of frail elderly people, who will require the assistance and care of family, friends and neighbours. The long term trend in the decline of the nuclear family will increase the pressure on volunteers to shoulder the responsibility for such care, all the more in societies where care in community is replacing institutional care as the dominant goal of social policy.

At the same time as these trends which are increasing the demand for volunteers, there are trends working to limit their supply. The rapid rise in unemployment throughout Europe will limit the availability of volunteers. Studies have shown that although volunteering can bring significant benefits to people outside the labour market, most unemployed people do not volunteer, their energies being spent more on trying to find paid work. Other long term trends such as the break up of traditional communities and what sociologists have termed the privatisation of home life, may also serve to undermine the capacity of people to engage in voluntary activities. The changing structure of the paid labour market, with many more women entering paid work for the first time, may also reduce the availability of volunteers.

On the other hand there are trends which may open up opportunities for an expansion of volunteering. Moves towards a shorter working week, and earlier

There are socio-economic factors which are increasing the demand for volunteers

retirement will give people, at least in theory, more time to engage in activities in their communities. But the main point to note is that it is not at all certain that the volunteer movement will be able to expand sufficiently to take on the increased demands being asked of it.

Another problem which could arise if we follow the path of substitution of statutory services by volunteer ones, is that tensions between paid professionals and volunteers could surface again. Historically, the labour movement has been wary of the development of voluntary action, seeing in it a threat to paid jobs and the terms and conditions of employment of their members. In recent years however there has been a softening of this hostility, at least as far as the UK is concerned, partly as a result of the shift in thinking on the Left away from statism towards welfare pluralism which I touched on earlier. In the UK after a long period of mistrust between the unions and the voluntary movement sector the situation has improved. Several trade unions are now offering membership to volunteer workers and one union has produced a leaflet in conjunction with a major volunteering agency laying down the terms and conditions of employment which volunteers should expect to receive, including access to insurance, adequate health and safety cover and access to a trade union. The Volunteer Center UK has published an agreement negotiated between half a dozen major trade unions, volunteer involving agencies and employers' organisations, which recognises the enormous value of volunteering in society, but which also recognises the genuine fears of the labour movement, and which concludes that volunteering should complement rather than substitute for the work of paid professionals. It is this type of agreement which will be placed in jeopardy by any attempt to view volunteers as a direct replacement to paid staff.

So much for the negative scenario for the future: one of increasing competition between the statutory and volunteer sectors. But there is a more positive vision of the future, one where voluntary action plays an expanded role in society but alongside statutory services, in cooperation with rather than in conflict with the state.

What are the factors needed to support such a vision of volunteering?

1. A well established infrastructure. Whilst volunteering exists in all settings, in all societies, in order for it to flourish it needs a well established infrastructure to sup-

The independence of the sector is one of its defining features and its greatest asset

port it. It is a myth that volunteering does not require an investment of resources. If governments are serious about encouraging voluntary activity, then they need to do more than just sing its praises. They need to create a structure in which it can flourish. This infrastructure may take the form of a specialist agency devoted to the promotion and support of volunteering and across Europe there is growing up a network of such agencies whose task it is to promote voluntary action and to support groups which involve volunteers in their work. Such an agency may also act as a job centre or volunteer bureaux for placing volunteers. Central government has a role to plan supporting such work.

2. A healthy partnership between the volunteer movement and the state sector. Volunteering flourishes best not where it is in direct opposition to the state; not where the state withdraws, but where a partnership arrangement is worked out. Volunteering requires an investment of resources from government to operate. This does not mean that government should assume control of the volunteer movement. The independence of the sector is one of its defining features and its greatest asset. The movement should be wary of attempts to transform its role into one of merely carrying out services funded by government. It needs to retain its independent voice, to challenge government policy, to campaign as well as to deliver services. The role of voluntary action in innovating and pioneering new services needs to be jealously guarded. But for volunteering to flourish it needs a healthy partnership with the state.

3. Also required for volunteering to flourish is a healthy relationship with the private or commercial sector. Companies sponsor charities and a number of ways, by giving money, by giving services and premises, and by seconding staff to organisations. With the economic problems which are confronting many countries throughout Europe, companies are looking for alternative ways to support their communities. One way is through company or employee volunteering schemes, which are well developed in the United States and which are growing in importance in the UK and elsewhere. Such schemes take the form of companies encouraging staff to get involved in voluntary activities. This may be

Volunteering needs to be sold as an exchange relationship, with both the volunteer and the recipient benefiting from the activity

during work time or outside of office hours. But the scheme is encouraged and usually financed by the company. With the onset of the Single European Market there is the possibility of companies to support volunteer groups across national borders. Companies with branches in other countries may see in the development of employee volunteering schemes an opportunity to put something into the local community and improve the companies image in the locality. It is important to recognise that the benefits are two way. The organisation will benefit from the influx of new volunteers, but the company too will benefit, as of course will the volunteers.

4. So far I have not mentioned the role of the voluntary organisation in promoting volunteering. I will say just one or two things. Firstly, the importance of the message. Volunteering is not about charity and dependency. It is not so much a gift relationship as an exchange relationship. All the evidence on motivation shows that people look to volunteer for personal satisfaction and need as well as for an opportunity to do something worthwhile in the community. This message needs to be highlighted. Volunteering needs to be sold as reciprocal relationship, with both the volunteer and the recipient benefiting from the activity. Only in this way will volunteering be able to appeal to a broader cross section of society. We must move away from old notions of charity and dependency which owe more to the volunteer movement of the nineteenth century than to the movement today.

Organisations should look at ways of promoting this message, by for example, greater use of the media. In the UK every year we organise UK Volunteers Week, which is one week set aside in the annual calendar to say thank you to volunteers and highlight the impact volunteers make. It may be possible in the future to organise a European week for volunteering.

Volunteering and The European Union

I have so far said very little about the European Union. Clearly the moves towards closer European integration will have implications for the role of voluntary action. The Single Market is intended to bring significant economic benefits to the continent. However, even the greatest advocates of a united Europe, accept that there will be economic and social dislocation, at least in the short term. There will be a role for voluntary action in advocating on behalf of those left behind in any economic advance. The single market may also lead to an increase in migration and immigration, and the resurgence of racial tensions can not be ruled out. Again voluntary action has a role to play in bringing communities together and campaigning on behalf of the dispossessed.

As policy is taken on a Europe wide level, so there will be a need for volunteer groups to organize on a Europe wide basis. The Network of Europe wide volunteer centres will grow more important.

Conclusion

The future for volunteering in Europe looks good. There is a growing consensus in political thought about the value of volunteering to society. In Western Europe as well as in the emerging democracies and nation states of Eastern and Central Europe, governments are looking for the voluntary sector and for volunteers to play an increased role in society. I have explored some of the dangers of following a policy of direct substitution of statutory services run by the state and have argued that the future of volunteering will be best served by healthy cooperation with the state. I will close with another observation from Ralph Dahrendorf. He has written that the presence of a free and independent voluntary sector is an important indicator of the liberty of a nation. It is vital that we heed this message and do all we can to ensure the vitality and the independence of the voluntary and volunteer movements over the next decade and beyond.