

3 An exclusive construct? Exploring different cultural concepts of volunteering

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Introduction

The voluntary sector (or should we say the third sector? or the non-profit sector?) today seems overrun with hard-to-define and contested concepts, starting with the definitions of the sector itself (see, for example, Smith 1997) and going on to include other terms such as 'community', 'capacity building' or 'social exclusion'. Each of these terms is a hotly debated area of research. This chapter focuses on the one contested concept that is arguably the most fundamental in the sector: volunteering.

If you stopped people in the street and asked them what the word 'volunteer' (or 'volunteering') meant to them, the chances are that a high proportion of them would respond with the conventional image of the middle-class lady with her twin-set and pearls caring for the needy. Ask a volunteer and you may get a slightly broader view – and a practitioner's view may be wider still – but, individually, few responses are likely to cover the diverse range of activities that are undertaken and which risk being marginalised by these narrow conceptualisations.

This chapter starts by exploring the Western construct of volunteering in order to build a picture of how the concept developed and how it is perceived in academic, professional and lay discourses. We go on to discuss the meaning of the term 'volunteering' for three specific groups in the UK: young people, disabled people and people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. By reflecting on the response of these three groups to the concept of 'volunteering', and exploring the realities of the activities being undertaken, the chapter argues that the term is a potentially exclusionary one. Finally we explore the implications for transporting the concept of volunteering into the international setting.

A(nother) loose and baggy monster: exploring the Western construct of volunteering

'Could I talk about "participation"? Oh yes. Could I refer to "community action"? Certainly. But Volunteer? Ugh! The word, I was reminded, has the ring of Baden Powell: the content reeks of middle-class do-gooding.' (Crossman 1973)

The term 'volunteering' occupies a paradoxical position. On the one hand, as Sheard (1995) and Handy et al (2000) stress, it lacks precision, as there is no clear-cut definition of what it encompasses. On the other hand, it has become extremely narrowly defined in the minds of the general population. While people have created their own constructs of volunteering, which are inevitably culturally and socially specific, the dominant representation is of volunteering as the domain of the white middle-class middle-aged female who volunteers (out of altruistic concerns) in social care settings or charity shops (Lyons et al 1998).

In exploring the prevailing images, motivations and experiences of volunteering, Thomas and Finch (1990) provide an insightful documentation of the general public's perception of volunteering. The study found that people's perceptions hinged on three key criteria: that volunteering was 'helping people', that it was providing a 'service', and that it took place in some form of 'organisation'. Here are some typical comments by respondents to the study:

'If you're going to make an effort to do voluntary work you'd sit down and consciously think to yourself, right I'm going to go and do that, I'm going to some organisation. And you don't really sit down and think, I'm going to consciously go over and help that woman across the road twice a week.'

'Well, helping one old lady is like just helping your next door neighbour or something, things that you'd do in the normal course of activities. Being a volunteer implies being part of something bigger ... a member of an organisation or a charity or something.'

The focus on organisational, or formal, volunteering is an important criterion, with the potential to exclude all those activities (and those who undertake them) carried out beyond the organisational setting. This is a consideration that is examined in much greater detail later in the paper. Also implied in the second quote above, and confirmed by Cnaan et al (1996), is a further key criterion: the proximity of volunteers to their beneficiaries. Helping a neighbour or a relative does not register in the popular conception of volunteering. Again, this criterion serves to exclude many of the activities that take place within the community setting, and is discussed at greater length below.

Beyond these preliminary indicators, argue Handy et al (2000) and Cnaan et al (1996), the key criterion used by the general public to define volunteering is the cost incurred by the participant. Only activities likely to have a high cost to the individual tend to be seen as volunteering. In the words of Handy et al (2000), 'for an

individual to be perceived as a volunteer, the perceived cost should clearly outweigh the benefit'. This stands in contrast to much of the recent emphasis on the mutually beneficial reality of volunteering, as promoted through programmes such as Millennium Volunteers¹ or through Active Community initiatives.

Beyond criteria that focus on the type of activity associated with volunteering, there are strong images associated with the types of people involved as volunteers. The following quotes are taken from Kamat's (2001) and Thomas and Finch's (1990) studies of public perceptions of volunteering:

'Volunteers are older than me and more experienced.'

'Volunteers are usually religious and with a disposable income.'

'Crimplene and pearls.'

'Middle-aged spinsters.'

'Like Emily Bishop from Coronation Street² ... an elderly, kind-hearted woman who would do anything for anyone.'

This is clearly a very narrow image that few people are likely to identify with, and which is therefore unlikely to attract them to volunteering. While such studies do show that people with experience of volunteering seem to associate it with a wider range of images, they still predominantly conform to the criteria presented above.

So how did such images evolve, and where are they going? This is not the place for a detailed history of volunteering in the UK (see, for example, Davis Smith 1995; Owen 1964). However, it is worth taking a brief glance at some of the broader changes in volunteering, at how government policy has shaped them, and at how these changes have in turn shaped the public's perception of volunteering. As reflected in the comments above, volunteering implies a service delivery model of 'doing good'. Bell (1999) argues that this model emerged from Victorian practices of benevolence, in which those who 'had' were encouraged to help those who 'had not'. It was from this era that the predominantly middle-class image of volunteering arose, through the idea of 'Lady Bountiful' helping the 'poor and needy' (Davis Smith 1995). At the time there was a reaction against such a class-based notion, which ignored the extent of voluntary action being undertaken in working class communities and at the same time provided hate figures for the British left (Davis Smith 1995). It would appear that this image and its negative connotations continue to this day, and, while it continues to exclude working class, informal or community-based action, its effects now extend well beyond the working class to further marginalise many other groups, as discussed below.

But what of the influence of recent government policy on volunteering? Sheard (1995) contends that since the 1960s government, which sees volunteering as a panacea for society's problems, has heavily influenced its development in Britain. In the 1960s, for

1 See Davis Smith et al (2002)

2 Television soap opera

example, volunteering was promoted by government as a way of protecting society from the threat of disaffected youth. In the 1970s government called on volunteers to protect society from the unions, and in the 1980s the threat was the return of mass unemployment. As for the 1990s, Thomas (quoted in Little 2001) states that:

'There have been Tory³ initiatives about helping others and service to the community. These are dated concepts about helper and helped, powerful and powerless.'

All these initiatives played on images of the altruistic giver benefiting a 'needy' recipient. As Little (2001) notes, they had little appeal to those people who wanted (or needed) to get something back for their giving. And what of Blair's⁴ Active Communities? As Bell (1999) states, we are witnessing a more proactive promotion of volunteering, with the emphasis moving back to a locally based model. However, at the heart of this potentially exciting development lies an emphasis on individual responsibility, 'active citizenship', and also on employment. Hence volunteering is once again being used by government for its own ends, this time to achieve social and economic stability, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods.

Now that we have heard the lay and policy discourses, what about our own perceptions as researchers and practitioners? We would argue that while the images of volunteers and volunteering are much wider in our own circles, they are still not inclusive. David Horton Smith (1997) talks about the flat-earth view of the non-profit sector, which ignores grassroots associations. We would extend this notion to volunteering where the 'flat-earth view' concentrates on formal activities within organisations while ignoring those who participate in informal activities. As Smith (1997) concludes 'round-world' views would include both adult and youth informal activity, and programme and associational volunteering. If we as researchers take such a restricted view, we risk limiting those who are included in our studies. Research such as the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering (Davis Smith 1998) shows a decline in the level of volunteering⁵, but, as Little (2001) argues, this may simply be due to the definition of volunteering used:

'Some, however, believe the altruistic aspiration is as strong as ever. The culprit is the v-word itself, with its inevitable blue-rinse connotations of middle-aged, middle-class women helping those less fortunate, alienating young people and ethnic minorities.'

It is to these groups that the discussion now turns, looking at how they perceive volunteering and the realities of actions within such communities. Each of the following sections takes apart different elements of this dominant Western construct of volunteering and shows how it stands in sharp contrast to the realities and desires of three particular groups: BME, young people, disabled people. Finally, we look at voluntary action in an international setting.

3 Conservative party

4 UK Prime Minister 1997-2007

5 But see, for comparison, the 2007 National Survey (Low et al 2007).

Black and minority ethnic communities

An increasing amount of research is being carried out into volunteering in BME communities. This is highlighting a number of very interesting themes: of particular relevance to this chapter is the picture of a unique cultural construct around participation within BME communities. Although research (that is, research limited to the flat-earth view) shows that people of BME origin are generally not involved as volunteers in voluntary organisations, there is a growing recognition (in the rounder-earth view) that participation is - and has a tradition of - thriving in BME communities. It is this clash between the formal, organisational assumptions of the dominant Western construct of volunteering and the reality of the informal, non-organisational basis of volunteering within BME communities that forms the theme of the following discussion.

The National Coalition for Black Volunteering (Obaze 2000) found that black people are dramatically under-represented as volunteers in charities. Its survey of 95 charities, between them involving 263,000 volunteers, found that black faces were 'noticeable by their absence'. Indeed, 41 per cent of charities had no black volunteers at all. This reinforced earlier research that found a lack of BME presence in voluntary organisations (Foster and Mirza 1997; Bhasin 1997). Niyazi (1996a) reported that, along with the under-representation of BME volunteers in mainstream voluntary organisations, there was also a lack of black staff at all levels of management. Akpeki (1995) pointed out the lack of black trustees in voluntary organisations. However, a number of studies looking more specifically at grassroots participation within BME communities have uncovered a great deal of informal involvement (see, for example, Leigh 2000; Obaze 2000; Kamat 2001; Foster and Mirza 1997).

So why is there such a divergence between the forms of BME participation and volunteering in formal organisations? We would argue that participation in formal voluntary organisations is inspired by the Western construct of volunteering, which has limited transferability to multicultural communities and potentially serves to exclude BME communities from the mainstream voluntary sector.

Kamat (2001) reports that institutional volunteering has traditionally been perceived as unattractive to BME people (and indeed, we would argue, to some white people!). Mainstream organisations offer a model of volunteering that can be formal and structured. As Niyazi (1996a) points out, this type of volunteering may even require character references and previous experience implying bureaucracy and formalisation. This is in contrast to the informal nature of BME volunteering, usually based on communal and informal values and a concept of self-reliance.

In Kamat's (2001) studies of BME volunteering, while 86 per cent of the 'formal volunteers' interviewed did consider what they had done to be volunteering, those who were engaged in informal, community-based activities did not. They tended to find the term too formal. As two respondents said:

'I do not consider the work I was doing to be volunteering because I was getting enjoyment from it. I don't like the term volunteering. It makes it sound like a job. If

someone comes to me for help, I either want to help or I don't, if I agree, then it is because I want to. It is not a job.'

'I suppose I was a volunteer because there was no compulsion to do what I did. I just did not see myself as a volunteer.'

In fact, only 24 per cent of those carrying out informal community activity had considered it to be volunteering. Many of them were adamant that it should not be considered as such because helping friends was part of human nature (again, we would argue that these same views could be found in some white communities). As one respondent said:

'We all help friends on an ongoing basis and don't consider it to be volunteering.'

Or as Obaze (2000) concludes:

'It is inherent in black people to help each other. We have had to look after ourselves and become self-reliant.'

This view of informal volunteering as a natural form of mutual support is again in opposition to the dominant Western construct based on the service delivery model, with a formal relationship between the helper and the helped.

Indeed, Latting (1990), alluding to the black social participation model, argues that, for the black community, voluntary action is based on an underlying norm of caring and responsibility. It can also be motivated by a desire to right historical wrongs, or even by a wish to assume responsibility for improving the community's disadvantaged position in the majority society.

At the very least, BME trends in volunteering diverge from many aspects of the Western construct. In the more extreme cases, BME communities do not identify at all with the Western construct, opting for the self-help, black-on-black participation that becomes an expression of solidarity for their community. Bhasin (1997) also found that black people preferred volunteering within their own community because they felt at ease and understood among people of the same religion and culture. Similarly, Rajesk Kalhan argues:

*'If we look at why there are not BME volunteers in the mainstream voluntary sector it is because they do not understand the culture of BME volunteering. [BME volunteering] is volunteering for organisations and causes that [the volunteers] have concern for and can relate to. This does not usually take place in mainstream voluntary sector organisations.'*⁶

Bhasin (1997) also reports that BME volunteers regarded their type of volunteering as a specific part of their culture and felt that it was a way to help preserve their

6 Personal communication from Rajesk Kalhan, former director of the Confederation of Indian Organisations (CIO), London.

children's identity or to reaffirm their own. We can therefore understand how BME volunteering translates into an informal activity that allows closeness to beneficiaries and represents an important expression of identity. This closeness of the beneficiaries is again at odds with the Western construct of volunteering.

More worryingly, the lack of a BME presence in mainstream volunteering can create a 'not for me' perception of this type of activity, which serves further to exclude BME groups from the voluntary sector. The image of mainstream organisations is such that BME people feel that their concerns would not be addressed, or that they would not fit in because they have not typically regarded such organisations as a place where black people volunteer. Furthermore, the promotional methods used by voluntary organisations may sometimes unwittingly exclude BME people: the word 'volunteering' does not exist in Asian languages and is uncommon in African-Caribbean communities (Bhasin 1997). Therefore promoting opportunities by using this term may not attract BME people.

The limitation of the Western construct of volunteering is its inability to reflect the varied range of activities taking place informally in BME (and also white) communities. This serves to marginalise such activities, with the result that researchers and practitioners now refer to the 'informal sector' or the 'black voluntary sector' as being the domain of most BME volunteering, as distinct from mainstream volunteering, which is the domain of the Western construct. Those working within the sector would argue that the informality of the activity indirectly assigns a lesser status to BME volunteering. Further, the Western construct of volunteering and the BME pattern of being involved in one's own community reflect different value systems, the latter often based on minority faith beliefs. The lack of knowledge about how these values affect voluntary activity could be limiting the extent to which practitioners from both sides work together.

Such marginalisation has serious implications. Whilst it may be easy for organisations operating in the mainstream voluntary sector to draw on a range of resources and advice, BME projects, owing to the marginal spheres in which they operate, have less support to draw upon. Furthermore, at a time of fragile race relations in the UK, there could be potential benefits from a wider recognition of the voluntary activity of BME communities, which is noted by policymakers (Social Exclusion Unit 2000) as a way to reach socially excluded people in these communities.

Young people

'Volunteering has something of an image problem ... many young people seem to be convinced that it is "not for people like us". This is probably due to the annoyingly persistent myth that volunteering is an activity largely carried out by middle-aged, middle-class women with too much time on their hands' (Niyazi 1996b).

The 1997 National Survey of Volunteering (Davis Smith 1998) showed a dramatic decline in the number of young people. However, as has already been suggested,

these figures may under-represent the actual extent of youth involvement, as evidence is growing that young people have negative images of volunteering and would not identify themselves with it⁷.

Whereas for the BME communities discussed above the main points of divergence from the dominant Western construct are the informality of action and the closeness of the beneficiaries, young people are more likely to take issues with the middle-class, middle-aged image of volunteering and the assumption that the costs should outweigh the benefits.

Two of the most notable recent studies of young people and volunteering by Gaskin (1998) and Niyazi (1996b) highlighted the contrast between young people's views of volunteering and the reality of the unpaid work they were already participating in. For example, Gaskin's study showed that a significant number of the young people consulted would not use the term 'volunteering' to describe their unpaid activities. As one volunteer said:

'I don't think that any of us would say, "We are a volunteer" – it's just not a word to use.'

Both studies showed that young people were largely turned off by 'volunteering': it did not appeal to them – nor, indeed, did they believe that the world of volunteering would want them. Indeed, Gaskin's study showed that young people believe society tends to see them as 'feckless, troublesome and economically dependent'. As such, they are not seen as 'contributors', and so by extension they are not seen as potential volunteers either.

Volunteering is regarded by young people as something that older people do. Gaskin (1998) notes that this is partly because young people perceive that the main activities of volunteers are working for charities and voluntary organisations, raising money for causes and 'helping in the neighbourhood' – not activities that young people generally associate themselves with. Once again, volunteering is hindered by its narrow image.

Furthermore, in contrast to the view that volunteering should involve high individual costs, Gaskin's (1998) study showed that young people demanded mutually beneficial activities to participate in, and that there was therefore a need to reconceptualise volunteering. In the acronym developed as a result of the study, FLEXIVOL, three of the eight criteria that young people demanded from volunteering were based on their need for returns: that is, Incentives, Experience and Laughs. Young people want something back from their unpaid work, and volunteering must therefore lose its image of involving costs to the individual if it is to appeal to them.

Interestingly, Gaskin (1998) found that, while young people did not identify with the term 'volunteering', no one could come up with a better term. The study concludes that what is needed is a change in perceptions of what the word 'volunteer' (or

⁷ See, for instance, Ellis 2006

‘volunteering’) encompasses rather than the use of a different term. However, as one respondent commented:

‘We’ve been conditioned to believe it’s a certain type of thing, but it’s not. But it’s hard to change that.’

One initiative that has attempted to bring about such a change in the understanding of volunteering is the Millennium Volunteers (MV) programme, which aimed to encourage young people aged 16-24 to volunteer by raising the profile of volunteering and promoting images of volunteering that are more relevant to the target audience.

The Institute for Volunteering Research was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to evaluate the Millennium Volunteers programme (Davis Smith et al 2002), a task that brought to light many of the ways in which individual MV projects have sought to rebrand volunteering and how far they have succeeded in doing so. The remainder of this section draws on these findings and unpublished comments made by respondents during the evaluation.

In many of the MV projects included in the evaluation, the projects’ coordinators had gone to considerable lengths to reinvent the image of volunteering to ensure that it appealed to young people. As the following two comments show, there was widespread recognition of the narrow view of volunteering that many young people held, and action was taken to educate them about the breadth of opportunities:

‘For some young people the image of volunteering is soft – they need to get past that ... They need to know the full remit of volunteering, we are getting the scope of volunteering across the board.’

‘Getting them in and showing them what volunteering can mean, letting people know the breath of volunteering.’

Beyond educating young people who had never volunteered before, there was also a need to convince young people who were already undertaking unpaid work that what they were doing was ‘volunteering’. As the following comment shows, this presented a considerable obstacle for many projects:

‘A lot of what we do is convincing young people that what they are already doing is volunteering.’

Young people had such a narrow view of what volunteering encompassed that it needed considerable work to broaden their views, to encourage them to see activities as diverse as drama projects and developing a local skateboard park as volunteering.

Furthermore, there was a need to work with young people to change their perceptions of themselves from being the cared-for to being the carer, to empower them to take on the role of volunteers:

'The barriers to recruitment are that the group we target do not consider themselves to be volunteers (eg those that are 23 with two young children), they don't perceive themselves as someone who can give support to someone else.'

MV projects have used a variety of tactics to recruit young people. The first comment below comes from a young families befriending scheme in which the 'volunteers' were parents themselves. The second comes from a project that has led to the establishment of a youth café. Both have chosen to replace the word 'volunteer' in their recruitment literature with more accurate descriptions of what the young people would be involved in, and in so doing they have avoided excluding people who are turned off by the term itself:

'The advert in the local paper said, "Are you 18-25, a parent and surviving the experience?" – it was really catchy.'

'If we say "volunteer" then people think of the traditional volunteer – old people doing good. I've changed that a lot since being here but there is still a long way to go. Young people see themselves as community activists; they do not see themselves as volunteers. I have been trying to get people to see the breadths of what volunteering is. We sell it as a community activism project but always say "Millennium Volunteers" – it is an educating thing – educating the wider population as to what volunteering is.'

As the following quote from a volunteer in the family befriending scheme shows, using appropriate language enables young people to be drawn into the project. Once there, they can be educated about the breadth of volunteering:

'My mum did volunteering before, at a second-hand shop. That was my view of volunteering. Now [my MV co-ordinator] has changed that.'

The MV evaluation (Davis Smith et al 2002) also found that there has been a re-education of the wider population about the role that young people can play in volunteering. Many projects witnessed a change in attitudes towards young people in their communities after they had been seen to participate in MV – young people had not previously been associated with volunteering in the minds of the general public. People are thus being influenced into taking a more round-world view of volunteering.

Disabled people

Although much less literature exists on disabled people and volunteering, we suggest that the Western construct of volunteering also serves to exclude disabled people. This is because it is promoted as a service delivery model, which has connotations for the relationship between helper and the helped. These further criteria for the Western construct can also be exclusionary.

As discussed above with reference to young people, disabled people are often seen solely in terms of their disability: they are viewed as the ‘cared for’ - in other words, the passive recipients of volunteering. Only rarely are disabled people seen as a resource, with the potential to make valuable contributions society as volunteers (RSVP 2000; Niyazi 1996c; Skill 1998; Terry-Schumann 2000). Boyle (quoted in Little 2001) argues that:

‘Traditional volunteering doesn’t take very seriously the capabilities of the people who are volunteered to, and [who] are defined as the problem.’

And, indeed, Terry-Schuman (2000) argues that this image is actively promoted by charity advertising, which stereotypically portrays disabled people as ‘tragic victims, sufferers, asexual, endearing, dependent, and in need of care’, indirectly reinforcing existing attitudes about care-givers and care-receivers in relation to disabled people. Walmsley (1993) contends that recent promotions of volunteering are equally problematic:

‘As it is currently conceived, it is likely that active citizenship will require passive non-citizens to receive the bounty of such volunteering. People with learning difficulties are ideally placed to become subjects, rather than actors, such schemes.’

In its report on disabled people and volunteering, Skill (1998) counters these negative images by arguing that volunteering is in fact the key to social inclusion and the very concept of volunteering must first become more all-encompassing. The Institute for Volunteering Research’s project on volunteering and social exclusion (IVR 2004) gathered further evidence of how disabled people relate to the concept of volunteering. Its findings suggest that the general image of volunteering among disabled people is poor. In interviews, one respondent commented:

‘A majority of disabled people probably won’t see themselves as “volunteers”, so you should avoid the term during the research process.’

The same respondent went on to suggest that the term ‘activist’ may be more appropriate, as people seek to move away from the traditional, passive image of disabled people as the subject of volunteering to a far more proactive image associated with activism.

International comparisons

At a global level, volunteering means different things to different people; in the Netherlands, for example, giving blood is not counted as volunteering, as it is not undertaken regularly — a prerequisite for volunteering. Davis Smith (2000) argues that, even though there are differences in perceptions, there is a ‘shared understanding of the basic elements of volunteering’ across the globe. The second part of this paper shows that the Western (or English) concept of volunteering can provide only a starting point for investigating the phenomenon in its international manifestations.

A transferable concept: volunteering in Russia

Strange as it may seem, there are still some places in the world where the idea of formal 'volunteering' is as yet undeveloped. However, such societies often exhibit strong patterns of informal activity. Although there is a long tradition of community action and mutual aid in Russia, the idea of voluntary activity through organisations and on behalf of specific causes is only now developing. This is partly because, as Bodrenkova (2001) points out, carrying out the voluntary work of one's choice was impossible under the Soviet regime, which repressed social initiatives.

However, since the end of perestroika in 1991, some space has been made for civil society and voluntary work, leading to the formation of many new NGOs in Russia. As the social commentator Lucas (2001) states:

'Freed from totalitarian controls, the energy and brains of millions have brought countless changes for the better. There are plenty of new businesses and such old ones as have survived are better run than they used to be. There is room for public-spiritedness and do-gooders.'

In 1996 volunteer centres were created throughout Russia, in some cases as departments of existing NGO resource centres. There is a growing recognition of volunteering among NGO practitioners, who show great enthusiasm for using volunteers in their local projects. Volunteers are also glad to have the opportunity to take part in social initiatives. A 1994 study of the motivation of Russian volunteers found that the desire 'to build a more just and free society' and 'to be of use to others' were the key incentives to getting involved.

So why has this development of volunteering not taken place until now? First, there have so far been few periods in Russian history when volunteering might have been possible. In 1917, for example, voluntary work was largely defined as the teaching of Communist ideology. The Soviet era introduced a new phenomenon to the Russian people, 'subbotniki', which can be freely translated as 'doing voluntary work on Saturdays'. The government encouraged Russian people to volunteer in public works projects to help repair the devastation caused by civil war. Activities based in the community were also strongly encouraged as they were felt to give people a sense of belonging and to improve the well-being of the community. However, the approach verged on the prescriptive: being involved clearly marked a person out as a good Soviet citizen. Subbotniki and related activities continued right up to the end of the Soviet Union. Although some Russian people look back with fondness at the sense of community and the mutual assistance they fostered, others are unable to forget how repressive the regime was. Thus, past volunteering has little to contribute to a definition that might be relevant to present-day Russian society. Indeed, Bodrenkova (2001) argues that, because the term 'volunteering' is still associated with the Communist regime, it retains largely negative connotations.

In such circumstances how could – and, more importantly how should – voluntary activity be promoted? To discover this, we must first compare Russians' feelings

about volunteering with the Western views discussed above. A recent project to develop volunteering in Samara, a city in the Oblast region of Russia, jointly led by the BEARR Trust, a London-based charity building links between the health and welfare sectors in Britain and the former Soviet Union, and Povolzhe, a local NGO resource centre, highlighted some interesting problems faced by NGOs in the region. A project manager involved in developing volunteering in Russian NGOs pointed out that, after perestroika, people faced social and economic problems that restricted their ability to volunteer:

'At this time people thought that they had to help themselves first. They had no time or energy to help anyone else. They felt that they could not be volunteers because their lives were too hard.'

Other practitioners explained that, because of the widespread economic hardship during this period, volunteering never really had a chance to develop and so has not become the done thing in Russian society.

Another reason why volunteering failed to develop may have been the different paradigm of 'doing good' in Russia – unlike in Britain, this has less to do with philanthropy and benevolence, and more to do with solidarity. One NGO representative said that there was slow progress towards developing volunteering because:

'If a person spoke about doing some volunteering for no reason other than altruism, this was thought of as an odd phenomenon.'

Indeed, one of the British partners in the Samara project recognised that volunteering has a very different status in Russia, pointing out that it is not given the recognition it deserves.

Whether altruism is a prerequisite for volunteering is another debate altogether. However, in developing a Russian interpretation of the word, we need to be aware of the difference between volunteering in a democratic society and volunteering in a totalitarian society. Because of their experiences under the Soviet regime, Bodrenkova (2001) argues, Russian people tend to be sceptical about what volunteering can do for them. To counter this scepticism, volunteering is now promoted as a part of civil society; people can get involved to improve their community - and they can decide when, how and for whom they will volunteer.

Attitudes are changing as Russia's voluntary sector reshapes itself. In Samara, many NGOs are enthusiastic about developing volunteering now that, owing to the presence of international organisations in the region, they have had a chance to see the impact of social action. This creates many opportunities for promoting volunteering - but some caution is also needed. In such a situation, it is often helpful to be able to import good practice in volunteering from the voluntary sectors of other countries. However, we suggest that a bottom-up approach to volunteering be adopted, based on local traditions, rather than an imported approach.

The British partners in the Samara project have even suggested that any promotional drive would be wise to use some specifically Russian terms for voluntary and community action alongside the word 'volunteering': this could help to develop broader-based associations. Russian practitioners have suggested *dobrayavolya* (assisting in charitable work), *obshchina* (a close community with mutual obligations and feelings of compassion), or *miloserdye* (charity).

In addition to terminology, the Oblast project has identified other practical barriers that need to be addressed:

- > currently there are few structures in place to facilitate the involvement of volunteers, nor is there widespread knowledge of how to support them
- > because of continuing economic pressures, people still feel that they can envisage becoming a volunteer
- > volunteering has a low public profile, partly because the media are not interested in it; hence there is a lack of visible routes for people interested in getting involved
- > most difficult to address is the lack of state support for volunteering; this is part of the wider suspicion the authorities still have about civil society, campaigning and politically focused NGO activities

We suggest that voluntary work is not recognised in Russia because its potential importance to society has been significantly underestimated. Through engaging with Russian organisations, one participant in the Samara project found that:

'The difficulties that the Russian organisations raised were in some part a result of the confusion that exists because of rapid changes in the whole system in Russia: ie the role and value of volunteering, the government's role/support of volunteer organisations and an absence of easily accessible funding.'

While the proponents of the Western approach talk about the unwritten social pact at the basis of voluntary action, a useful construct of volunteering has yet to be discovered in Russia. Any definition that does emerge is, however, more likely to be based on the initial aid model than on the philanthropic tradition that underlies the Western approach.

A less transferable concept: volunteering in India

Whereas the Russian definition of volunteering is still evolving, in India there is a well-developed and distinctive construct of volunteering, fused with a value system that reflects the culture, philosophy and faith beliefs of the country. The sense of what volunteering is has been developed through the relationship of self to society and by the fact that many communities in India have made *seva* (service), *dana* (voluntary contribution) and *sharaamdaan* (voluntary labour) intrinsic parts of their activities. A recent

conference organised by United Nations Volunteers (UNV) India explored the spirit of volunteering and found that people felt it was a 'value based more on a feeling' rather than on an image, as in our Western construct. It was also argued that volunteering had its roots in the idea of *swantaukhaya* (one's own happiness lies in another's).

At the same time, however, support for global citizenship is growing. There is an interest in different kinds of voluntary activity and in different institutional frameworks as settings for activity. External pressures of globalisation, funding and new modes of work are affecting volunteering in India. Indeed, UNV India points out that volunteers are now part of a consumerist world, in which what was formerly done in a spirit of service and solidarity has now acquired a market value, Whilst UNV recognises the need to change, it counsels caution about submitting to external pressures:

'Traditional ways of volunteering need to be revived and brought out the context of "received volunteering". There is a co-option of voluntary action by institutions like the state and funding agencies. It was felt that voluntary action was being made to fit into parameters and compulsions dictated by them.'

An example of this is the drive for employee volunteering. It was argued at the conference that, given the history of conflict between multinational interests and the concerns of volunteers in India, there were issues to be resolved before this type of volunteering could be developed. New technology is crucial and the corporate sector could provide access to this through funding, but it was felt that this might also limit the community's self-help activities and co-opt the actions of volunteers. Thus, as elements of the Western construct of volunteering become more popular, it will be interesting to see how global concepts of voluntary action take their place alongside deeply rooted Indian traditions of volunteering. Whilst spirituality will undoubtedly continue to sustain voluntary action, shared experiences involving new partners such as the private sector and new funders may further extend the range and associations of volunteering in India.

A concept that excludes

'Volunteering' is socially and culturally specific. It means different things to different people, according to their social, cultural, historical and political positions. However, there is one excessively dominant construct of volunteering, which has emerged from a specifically Western setting and has served to marginalise other, minority definitions. As a result of this marginalisation, individuals who are potential volunteers but who do not conform to, or identify with, this dominant construct are inadvertently excluded from 'volunteering'.

However, while it is clear that the term 'volunteering' is problematic, there is a great indecision within the voluntary sector about what to do next. For some, the answer is a re-branding: programmes such as Millennium Volunteers have sought to change

the traditional image of volunteers, so that those on the margins of the construct can see that it has something to offer them. This re-branding involved re-educating the general public, not only about the diversity of action covered by 'volunteering' but also about the greater diversity of people who are involved. As Thomas and Finch (1990) argue:

'To attract more volunteers there appears to be a need first to promote a positive image of volunteering, and to inform about the broad scope of fields and activities that it covers.'

And, as Little (2001) suggests, such as re-branding would help to address the disparity between the existing profile of volunteers in most mainstream organisations and the self-activism of the community and the BME sector.

Others argue that the term 'volunteering' should be abandoned altogether, as it is impossible to dissociate it from the type of activities traditionally and predominantly carried out by the white middle classes. This has been done by Timebank, which tries to avoid the negative stereotypes of volunteering by talking about 'Time Givers' and 'Time Partners'. However, there are concerns that, by abandoning such an undeniably useful word, the voluntary sector might lose some of the clarity of its public profile.

One alternative that we would support is to use bottom-up definitions of volunteering alongside the mainstream construct. For example, Williams et al (2000) suggest that concepts such as 'giving', 'sharing' and 'duty' can be used to describe unpaid activity in ways that more accurately meet the needs of different communities and reflect their own norms and values. Such concepts would be community-led rather than policy-led, and would take account of such factors as heritage, faith, ethnicity and local histories of community self-help.

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