

Volunteering as a participation pathway

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01 Introduction

This paper focuses on the implications of the findings from the Pathways through Participation project for volunteer management. It is aimed at small, medium and large volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) as well as volunteer centres (VCs) and other volunteering infrastructure organisations at the local, regional and national level.

From a policy perspective, the issue of participation is more important now than ever, as a variety of policy developments related to the Big Society, localism, commissioning public services and charitable giving are high on the agenda of central government. A range of policy-makers speak about the potential for increased participation as an antidote to many of the social and economic challenges we face. The Coalition Government is for example, promoting it as a means to improve employability, empower individuals and improve the

delivery of public services. These ambitious policy goals are, however, running alongside extensive cuts to public expenditure in an effort to reduce the deficit - many voluntary and community organisations have reported a major reduction in income in recent months. Furthermore, the last decade has seen a stagnation in national rates of volunteering.

The Pathways through Participation project looks at participation in a very broad sense and considers the act of taking part in a wide range of social, public and individual activities including volunteering, giving money, boycotting a product, voting, signing a petition or responding to a local council consultation. This paper draws out the research findings and implications that are relevant to volunteering, defined here as unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment ('formal volunteering').

02 The research

The Pathways through Participation project is a joint research project led by NCVO in partnership with the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) and Involve, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. It explores how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives. Through the improved understanding of the reasons for, and the contexts of participation, the project also aims to influence policy and practice, and encourage the development of opportunities for participation that are better suited to people's needs and aspirations. It focuses on the following questions:

1. How and why does participation begin and continue?
2. Can trends and patterns of participation be identified over time?
3. What connections, if any, are there between different forms and episodes of participation and what triggers movement between them?

The methodology placed individuals at the centre of the research and looked at participation in three fieldwork areas (Enfield, Suffolk and Leeds). The researchers conducted over 100 in-depth interviews, exploring participation over people's lifetime and within the communities they belong to. This approach allowed people to tell their story in their own words.

03 Key findings

Drivers of participation

Participation is shaped by numerous factors that shift over time and are in turn shaped by the impact of participation itself.

These factors operate at different levels:

- Individual, including motivations, personality, identity and resources.
- Relationships and social networks, including an individual's family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and wider social networks.
- Groups and organisations, through which people participate, including their structures, processes and culture.

- Local environment and place, including local spaces, events, institutions and politics.
- Wider societal and global influences.

This research shows that the drivers of participation (personal motivations and triggers) are tempered by people's access to practical resources (e.g. time, money, health and access to transport), learnt resources (e.g. skills, knowledge and experience), and felt resources (e.g. confidence and sense of efficacy).

The research also demonstrates the importance of institutions, organisations and groups, in providing the environment, conditions and opportunities for an individual to translate their motivation into action.

Participation over people's lifetime

Some people stay involved over their entire lives while others drop in and out of participation. Levels of intensity of participation tend to be in peaks and troughs although some participation is consistent and deep, or consistent and light. There is no set path of participation or a particular start and end point; it varies for different people. Some people follow a pathway in which their responsibility grows over time. The research found, however, that participation is not linear and does not necessarily deepen, intensify or become more formalised over time.

Links between activities

The findings challenge the notion of spillover, whereby people who are involved in one type of participation (e.g. volunteering) naturally get involved in or have a spillover into other forms of participation such as going to a local consultation or indeed participation that occurs at the individual level (e.g. ethical consumerism or charitable giving). There are examples of this happening, but it is neither systematic nor automatic.

04 Implications and recommendations for volunteering

The table below addresses three key questions for VIOs and VCs: what are the key findings relevant to volunteering? what do these findings tell us about volunteering? and what might VIOs and VCs do with this information?

What? (key findings)	So what? (implications)	Now what? (recommendations)
People are motivated to engage in activities that have meaning and value to them and connect with the people, interests and issues they care about. Motivations arise from the meaning people give to their involvement, their personality and identity, their values, beliefs and world view, and their perceptions of the impact of their involvement. The social ties that are formed through participation keep people involved in organisations and activities.	This suggests a need for VIOs and VCs to better understand an individual's previous volunteering experience, motivation, life stage and interests. VIOs and VCs may need to ask themselves if they have sufficient information about potential and current volunteers to adequately recruit, support and retain them.	VIOs could adapt recruitment processes to better capture information about history, interests, needs and life stage. Role descriptions should be clear and include factors and benefits that people care about when volunteering such as social networking opportunities, flexibility, time of day, degree of formality and growth potential. VIOs would benefit from better tracking and articulation of the impact of volunteer activity so that people see and feel that their efforts are worthwhile.
People often lack information and knowledge about opportunities to participate and support mechanisms available at the local level.	People need to be aware of opportunities and the support available to them in order to engage. Far more needs to be done to publicise volunteer opportunities, especially to wider audiences and through a variety of means.	Volunteering infrastructure bodies could expand on their role as a local information hub, promoting other, connected forms of participation alongside volunteering.

What? (key findings)	So what? (implications)	Now what? (recommendations)
<p>Group structures and processes have a direct impact on whether people continue to participate or decide to stop.</p>	<p>Negative experiences with groups, meetings or leaders can prevent or stop someone from volunteering and impact on the type of activity people are involved in and their future involvement as well as overall volunteer retention within VIOs.</p> <p>VIOs must be well prepared for the inevitable conflicts and tensions that can arise among group members and should properly tend to group dynamics internally.</p> <p>Organisations, particularly smaller grassroots groups, should consider how to recognise and prevent 'burn-out' among volunteers and encourage a sustainable model of leadership development.</p>	<p>VIOs, including their frontline staff and existing volunteers, need to be attentive to how they welcome new and potential volunteers. People want to feel they are needed and accepted into a friendly and accessible environment. This must be considered at all entry points to an organisation including physical and virtual entry points.</p> <p>VIOs should pay deliberate attention to ensuring that group planners and leaders have training and skills in organising efficient and effective meetings, dealing with conflict, facilitating groups and supporting people.</p> <p>Volunteer managers and leaders need to understand and identify the signs of 'burn-out' and also need to be in communication with volunteers about their intentions, dislikes and goals.</p> <p>It is acknowledged, however, that groups need to have adequate financial and human resources if they are to achieve these recommendations.</p>
<p>There is a lack of equality between people and this has an impact on the type of activity people are involved in and levels of involvement. This may include low confidence levels, lack of resources or a perceived lack of skills.</p>	<p>There is scope to involve a wider range of people in volunteering and to further reduce the barriers to volunteering.</p> <p>Issues of power and inequality are linked to why and how people get and stay involved. Power is held by everyone, but in unequal amounts; for example, wealth, levels of education, language fluency, experience and confidence are unequally distributed between individuals and communities. The result is that some people are faced with more constraints and barriers to volunteering than others, and less means to overcome them.</p>	<p>VCs could build further on their already positive record of working with a diverse range of people, reflecting the depth and breadth of volunteering opportunities that exist.</p> <p>VIOs should provide an intentionally welcoming, positive, accessible and inclusive space to help address barriers to, and inequalities in, volunteering. Support may be particularly relevant when working with volunteers with lower levels of confidence.</p>
<p>Participation can be encouraged and enabled; especially through families, educational and religious institutions and community 'bridge-builders'. Local community hubs and key leaders are important factors for people starting and staying involved.</p>	<p>Existing institutions, VIOs and VCs are important in providing the space, conditions and practical support people need to volunteer.</p> <p>All the examples of multiple involvements encountered in the research were supported by a collective structure, which key lynchpins either set up or provide important linking functions in.</p> <p>Community gatekeepers, leaders and 'closed' groups can become barriers for people to volunteer.</p>	<p>VIOs and VCs should develop ways to link, support and sustain the key entry points and volunteering hubs throughout communities.</p> <p>Opportunities to volunteer with other family members and friends should also be developed, particularly with parents introducing children to volunteering.</p> <p>VIOs and VCs should develop high awareness levels among gatekeepers and 'closed groups' to be as open and welcoming to new volunteers as possible.</p>

What? (key findings)	So what? (implications)	Now what? (recommendations)
<p>Participation is dynamic and its frequency and intensity changes over time. A person's life experience impacts on and triggers different forms of involvement.</p>	<p>The findings challenge the notion of volunteering as a progression, or something that develops over their life; it did not find that people's lives reflect a linear ladder of volunteering in which involvement grows steadily, or in which they take on increasing responsibility in a VIO.</p> <p>VIOs can benefit from having greater knowledge about the triggers, context and life stages of volunteers when involving and engaging people.</p>	<p>VIOs should seek to understand more about the journey that their volunteers take; how their involvement is linked to external factors, triggers and barriers. By developing an even more proactive and nuanced approach to volunteer recruitment and management, VIOs can gain a more sophisticated understanding of why someone wants to volunteer, or how it relates to their family or professional life. This can help VIOs develop more satisfying and fulfilling opportunities and potentially increase retention.</p> <p>VIOs could target recruitment at people in key life stages for volunteering such as the newly retired or parents of young children. Organisations could also strategically engage with communities after key events such as natural disasters, protests or community conflicts in order to capitalise on the levels of community goodwill present.</p>

05 Food for thought

The research has generated a number of questions related to how we define volunteering and volunteers. It sheds light on the relationship between volunteering and other forms of participation and how we conceptualise and support these activities. We must now ask ourselves what needs to be done to improve equality of opportunity to volunteer and if we can mitigate any of the key barriers that prevent many from getting involved. We must consider how different types of participation interrelate, for example between volunteering and giving money within the same organisation. How many organisations provide conduits for volunteers to become involved in other forms of participation? Should VIOs be increasingly connecting these types of activities? Should VCs be more of a channel for volunteering among a wide range of VIOs or should we develop the concept of a volunteering passport?

We need to consider how VCs might help VIOs to connect and link volunteers between different organisations so that as their interests and motivations change, the opportunities evolve to be better matched to the individual. There is also scope for VCs to further develop linkages with schools and religious

institutions as they represent major conduits of participation. There are also volunteering 'silos' such as in sports and the arts where VCs can likely do more to link them with other sub-sectors. Volunteering infrastructure has the potential to be at the forefront of developing models for sustainable volunteering that transcend VIOs, and has the ability to facilitate an individual's participation over a lifetime rather than in one organisation. Additionally, volunteering infrastructure must clearly develop better mechanisms for evidencing the impact of volunteering on individuals, organisations and communities.

06 Further information

This briefing paper has highlighted some of the key findings and implications related to volunteering for VIOs and volunteering infrastructure and is intended to be a platform for discussing how volunteering can be better supported and managed in the future. Detailed findings, the full report and other briefing papers are available on the Pathways through Participation website.

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project visit the website <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/>

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www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

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