'Working with communities' to 'build social capital'— Reflecting on old and new thinking about volunteers

Christine Fahey argues that without further research and a deeper understanding of the relationship between volunteers and society, new government volunteering policies run the risk of destroying the very think they seek to grow.

By Christine Fahey

In recent years volunteers have received increasing recognition. The International Year of the Volunteer seems to have initiated a snowballing of accolades and awards. While the praise is richly deserved there is a tone of complacency at our nation's 'great treasure'. Researchers and social analysts point to declining trends in volunteering, while governments increasingly attempt to work with communities through volunteers. This paper explores some of the emerging debates in the literature, and points to the need for a deeper understanding of volunteering as a social phenomenon.

Despite the reliance on volunteers by many services, including emergency management services, surprisingly little is known of the core relationship that volunteers have with their communities and organisations. Recent advances in thinking have shed light on the role of social capital in supporting strong societies, and voluntary associations have been strongly promoted as builders of social capital. However, with recent government policies aiming for increasing community self-reliance, there is a danger of stressing and ultimately destroying the volunteer culture that is so highly valued.

Introduction

This paper argues that without further research and a deeper understanding of the relationship between volunteers and society, government policies that push communities towards increased volunteering run the risk of destroying the thing they seek to grow. The paper explores the basis for the increasing use of volunteers and demonstrates that it is grounded in ideology not evidence.

Increasingly, governments see society "less as a source of needs ...and more as a source of energies" (Dean 1999 p.152), leading to greater reliance on strategies such as social capital and community participation to effect change. This new focus is reflected in funding opportunities, new initiatives and government strategies. This paper does not aim to criticise such concepts, but looks for the theoretical and evidence base upon which two such concepts, mutual obligation and social capital, are founded. Taken in isolation, new government policies and strategies that increase efforts to work with communities may not harm volunteering. But in the current context of a rapidly changing and threatening environment for volunteering, widespread increases in the use of such strategies may prove to have unintended consequences, as it is often overlooked that they generally require a greater volunteering effort from our society.

Defining the topic

Definitions of volunteering are debated, largely because the word has several uses, and the boundaries of volunteering blur with other activities such as helping others and community participation. Most commonly the term is used to encompass a formal setting. Theorists have long agreed that volunteering has three main functions: it is an avenue for individuals to participate in community life; an avenue for democratic representation; and a service delivery mechanism (Darvill and Munday 1984; Ware 1989).

Coleman relaunched the term social capital in 1988 with the definition "the ability of people to work together for common purposes in groups and organisations." (Paldam and Svendsen 1999 p.4). Since then there have been many definitional variations of social capital, but a core concept is that the basic underpinnings of social capital are networks, shared norms and values and that these contribute to the productivity of individuals, families and communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002; Stone and Hughes 2002 p.2). Productivity is enhanced because social

capital facilitates co-operation, as for example, time is not wasted on expensive and lengthy legal contracts. Volunteers are considered an important indicator of social capital (Putnam 1993), as they represent a highly organised level of cooperation to provide mutual benefits.

The concept of mutual obligation is fundamentally a re-thinking of the role of citizens, who now no longer have only rights, but an obligation to be active and productive citizens (Roche 1992). In Australia this particularly means that while society has an obligation to help those in need, welfare recipients have a responsibility to participate in social and economic activity (Lyons 2001 p.209).

The link between volunteers, politics and social capital

Volunteers play an important role in our society and are spoken of highly. The Police Commissioner, Brian Bates exemplified the type of language used about volunteers when he said "the …volunteers performed extraordinary tasks under extraordinary conditions, showing their dedication, initiative and courage in conditions not made for the faint-hearted (Northern Territory Police Fire and Emergency Services Media Unit 1998).

Increasing interest in volunteering appears to be based on evolving political theories and concepts such as social capital and mutual obligation. Political scientists historically have studied the political theories that explain or influence government's roles. During the 1900s the main theories to influence Australian governments were those of the Liberals and Social Democrats (Labor). The roles of the three main sectors: the state, the markets, and the voluntary, or Non-government sector (NGO), have formed a central part of traditional political theory analysis and debate.

Debate has often polarised around either too much state or too much market. Typically, a social democrat position explains that the state has the most important role as too much market involvement threatens democracy, and the NGO sector is not given a prominent role. Conversely, a typical liberal position explains that too large a state sector crowds out the role of communities and markets, and that volunteer activity should fill gaps left by government (Stretton and Orchard 1994).

Studies of governmentality however, focus on analysis of the methods and strategies of governing, and recently point to a 'new politics of community' (Rose 1996). In this analysis, neo-liberal governments see individuals as active members of a range of groups, which are all expected to participate in a diversity of government strategies (Dean 1999 p. 171). In an analysis that considers methods of government; self-esteem, empowerment and community consultation are considered as techniques for managing a range of

activities such as health promotion, community development and environmental protection (Dean 1999 p.168).

Risk management provides a good example of this development, one that can be readily understood by the emergency management sector. Attention has turned towards communities as a resource for managing risk, as evidenced by papers at the recent Emergency Management Australia 2003 Australian Disaster Conference 'safer sustainable communities' (Emergency Management Australia 2003). Risk management is now seen not only as the responsibility of experts and agencies, but also as the responsibility of communities, and a subsequent theme of 'working with communities' has emerged. Implicit in this approach is the need for community members to participate, and volunteer time and effort.

The convergence of the Third Way and social capital

These new political strategies have evolved to deal with the perceived problems of globalised economies, and disenfranchised local communities, and are often referred to as the 'Third Way'. These policies, popularised by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, attempt to reintroduce the societal values of reciprocity, social justice and community that are believed to have suffered from the effects of modernisation and globalisation, while providing the flexibility to adapt to change (Giddens 1998). A key factor in this approach is the role of the citizen, who is now seen to have responsibilities as well as rights. At the heart of this approach is the belief that the elevation of rights above responsibilities has led to excessive welfare benefits, vandalism, crime, and excessive government intervention (Roche 1992).

Governments believe they must wind back service provision to allow community groups to deliver services, resulting in increases in social capital and a new citizen ethos of responsibility.

Putnam popularised the concept of social capital and used membership of associations as a key indicator of social capital. In his theory individuals develop the ability to cooperate and feel involved in the public-sphere through group association (Putnam 1993 p.89–91). Groups that share common values are more likely to trust others in their group, a direct result of being able to feel confident of the likely response of other members in any situation. So in this theory group association builds trust and hence social capital.

The concept of mutual obligation, outlined in the McClure report, also has been increasingly used; it now underpins the welfare policy in Australia. The McClure report maps out a vision of the responsibilities of government, business and NGOs, with the NGO contribution named as: assisting representation; partnering with business; delivering local services; and "fostering social entrepreneurship" (McClure 2000 p 45). The Mutual Obligation Initiative is a requirement that those receiving income support in Australia must undertake activities other than job seeking to receive entitlements. Community and volunteer work are two of the listed activities (Family and Community Services 2003).

These factors have increased government's focus on volunteering. Peter Costello stated that "One of the positives of limited government is that it allows the non-government associations to develop and prosper and deepen social relationships in a community" (Shanahan and Saunders 2003). This statement highlights the

thinking of the Howard government about the role of the NGO sector being greater than the previous three accepted roles of representation, participation and service delivery. Now NGOs can also build up our communities and increase social capital.

A new responsibility for volunteers?

These policy and strategy developments impact on volunteerism, because of the expectation that volunteers will build trust and provide an avenue for community participation and reciprocity. However, these ideologically driven changes are generating some disquiet as they are occurring in a volunteer policy vacuum (Warburton and Oppenheimer 2000 p.1), with little supporting research or theory development.

One of the key threats posed by this approach is the inconsistencies and gaps between the expectations on volunteering and what is known about volunteering. As outlined, new expectations of volunteering include: increasing involvement and responsibility for local service provision through NGOs; building social capital thereby decreasing society's health and welfare problems; and providing an avenue for individuals to meet their welfare recipient obligations.

Evidence base for the new direction

Some of the key unknowns from the new expectations of volunteering are: do NGOs have the capacity to increase service delivery?; how does volunteering generate social capital?; and will volunteering provide an avenue for meeting mutual obligation requirements? I argue that we do not know the answers to these questions, and that current knowledge provides contradictory evidence, making it difficult to understand the role of volunteering in our society.

Will NGOs increase responsibility for service provision?

Evidence does not support the assumption that if governments fail to provide services then NGOs will take up the slack where they perceive the need. Statistically, the NGO sector increases in size when the government sector increases, the greatest increase in Australia's third sector occurred during the welfare state years, post 1945 to mid 1970s (Lyons 2001 p.206). Similarly, during the 1980s cuts to services in the United States, communities did not replace services through volunteering (Phillips n.d p.9). Ware highlights too, that in the United Kingdom (UK) NGOs operate in similar fields to government, and do not thereby fill gaps (Ware 1989).

Another inconsistency is that theories about volunteering focus on citizen participation and representation, and yet many of the current expectations are based on increased service provision. Economists theorise that volunteer service provision arises due to

government failure because a minority, who are not satisfied with the type or level of public good provided, will support a volunteer association that provides the service they want (Weisbrod 1988). This theory explains a mutual benefit type of association, but does not adequately explain the more altruistic public service volunteering, or risk management volunteering.

Even if NGOs attempt to take up the provision of services left by government, or extend into new areas such as risk management, it is questionable whether they can recruit enough volunteers. Though volunteering is increasing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001) there is a decline in volunteer numbers within traditional NGOs, as volunteers seek short, intermittent volunteering experiences (Pusey 2000). Services such as emergency services that require high levels of commitment are having difficulty in recruiting volunteers. Those who are volunteering are contributing more hours (Lyons and Hocking 2000; Institute for Volunteering Research 2003) increasing the potential risk of volunteer burnout, particularly in rural areas where individuals volunteer more than their urban counterparts (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001).

Others point out that families and informal volunteers bear the burden when governments cut funding to service provision. Darvill and Mundy showed that in 1983 conservative governments in the UK, while expounding the need for increased provision of services by the voluntary sector, actually cut grants to voluntary organisations. They comment "In this context it is clear that families (women especially) will be expected to bear the burden of a so-called 'community care' policy …" (Darvill and Munday 1984 p.9). Ironmonger highlights the shift to hidden care in Australia, which is burdening families. Between 1992 and 1997 he found that a 24.4% increase in volunteering hours (including informal volunteering) "seems to be a result of Australians, particularly women, spending more time providing physical and emotional support for elderly, sick or disabled adults." (Ironmonger 2000 p.60). These women will have less time available for the type of community work that so many sectors are beginning to want, such as increased parental involvement in schools, or for formal forms of volunteering such as ambulance work.

Does service provision volunteering build social capital?

Social capital provides a framework that may help understand the nature of the link between volunteering and our culture, but while there is agreement that social capital is a complex concept related to supporting group action, there is little agreement about what it is (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002). Empirical evidence is based on measuring group associations, exchange of information, trust, tolerance, and connectedness to others. However, there is confusion

about which of the measured factors are causative factors, outcomes or a form of social capital.

Group association is often treated synonymously with volunteering. However, Wollabeck and Selle's research suggests that the role of volunteering in building social capital may have been overstated, but the role of group association has not. They found that belonging to multiple groups is a more productive source of social capital than active volunteering in one group, and that volunteering for one organisation "does not contribute much to the extension of networks", or trust (Wollebaek and Selle 2002 p.46-48). According to this research, a committed emergency services volunteer does not necessarily contribute to social capital.

In the rush to embrace social capital many have overlooked its dark side. Cox recently revisited the socialist discourse on how volunteering can lead to increased inequalities or at best, maintain an unjust status quo (Cox 2000 p.143). Wilkinson and Bittman similarly suggest that the links between social capital and volunteering become tenuous if the volunteering is government driven and based on winding back welfare, and that instead "relations of power and dependency [will be institutionalised] at another level" (Wilkinson and Bittman 2002 p.7).

To date the links and connections between volunteering and social capital are not clear. Current research shows that NGOs contribute to building social capital but that there is little consensus on how this occurs, and which type of organisations and management styles build or destroy social capital (Lyons 2002 p.184).

Will volunteering provide an avenue for meeting mutual obligation requirements?

There are too many unexplored issues around welfare recipients undertaking forced volunteering for this paper to deal with comprehensively, and so it will focus on how the current demographics of Australia's volunteers suggests there may be difficulties for welfare recipients wishing to volunteer. Formal volunteering in Australia is the domain of white, married, middle-aged, middle to upper-class, employed individuals with high levels of education (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). There is likely to be both cultural and resource barriers to more marginal groups participating in volunteering.

Volunteers identify closely with the philosophy and work of the organisation they volunteer for (Fahey and Walker 2002). As the cultural and value systems of society, and of the organisations that utilise volunteers, impact on volunteer recruitment and retention, then it is likely that volunteering attracts those from the dominant culture. The power of word-of-mouth recruitment will work to reinforce the participation of the dominant middle-class Australian culture and minimise

participation from marginal groups. Existing group members too, may fear the discord that comes with a less homogenous group and subtly provide a less than warm welcome.

Less access to resources may also hinder the participation of welfare recipients in volunteering activities. Volunteers identify that volunteering costs time and money, with transport costs, meal costs and training costs providing a barrier to those with lower incomes (Fahey and Walker 2002). Volunteering also creates costs for the NGO in training, supervision and insurance, which may explain why the larger NGOs are less likely to use volunteers (Lyons 2001).

In summary there is a mismatch between expectations and capacity to deliver. There is uncertainty about how NGOs deliver social capital, and whether they will fill the service gaps left by government, doubts too about whether fulfilling a mutual obligation requirement is as simple as government policy implies. What is known is that it is increasingly difficult to recruit long-term volunteers, that the NGO sector grows or shrinks in the same direction as government and that most evidence of the relationship between social capital and volunteering is with group association, not service provision.

What can be done?

I argue that volunteering is facing a new challenge in addition to the more obvious difficulties of volunteer recruitment and retention. That threat is in the form of new government expectations of the role of volunteers, through both NGOs and communities, evidenced by strategies based on concepts of social capital and mutual obligation. I have highlighted several areas where the current evidence does not support this expectation that volunteers are capable of an expanded role. This paper does not aim to dismiss concepts as important as social capital and mutual obligation, as they may prove to be vital to a thriving society. Instead my argument is that increasing expectations and the use of government strategies that require volunteering, such as the expectation that volunteering can and should be responsible for generating social capital and assisting mutual obligation policies, may stress and damage the culture of volunteering.

Governments must think more strategically about how their policies affect volunteers and volunteering. Volunteers need to be understood in a way that captures the diversity of the volunteering experience and that places it within a broad socio-historical picture. We should not ignore, nor abuse, the caring and altruistic side of volunteering if future policy directions are to ensure the ongoing support of volunteers in the provision of services. We need to find the heart of volunteering and understand how it works, so that government policies and strategies can support and strengthen a volunteering society.

Authors Note

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