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Taking People out of Boxes and Categories

Voluntary service and social cohesion

ARTHUR GILLETTE

SUMMARY

Traditionally, the 'haves' have helped the 'have-nots' through philanthropic volunteering. Of late, however, a surprising new trend has come to the fore: through voluntary service, increasing numbers of excluded people are participating in programmes that break new ground in voluntary service. In the process they may be enhancing social cohesion.

Drawing on a discussion note prepared for the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Programme¹, Gillette cites three case studies from the survey material gathered by UNV: a centre for disabled people in Cambodia run by a UN volunteer from the Philippines; a US programme that offers detainees in prisons the opportunity to serve as firemen with teams of local volunteers; and a project organised by the European

Voluntary Service (EVS) programme at the end of the 1990s, under which intra-European exchanges took place involving young volunteers who were themselves subject to several kinds of exclusion.

Whilst acknowledging the difficulties of involving the excluded in voluntary service, Gillette identifies a number of impacts that could enhance social cohesion: firstly the empowerment of people previously excluded from society; secondly the sense of self-worth gained by these participants; and thirdly, a commitment to change which enabled the participants to initiate other ventures after the service experience.

The chapter concludes by citing a range of conditions that are necessary to facilitate voluntary service by excluded people, and outlines a number of issues which require further research and development if this approach is to foster meaningful social cohesion in the long term.

Introduction

There are today persistent and often worsening gaps of many kinds between privileged and underprivileged individuals, communities, countries and groups of countries. These gaps separate the 'haves' from the 'have-lesses' and 'have-nots' both within and between countries. Exclusion inhibits or prevents the full enjoyment and exercise of human rights by large segments of the world's population. It is a cause of individual and collective distress, and contributes to terrorism and other forms of psychological and physical violence. Yet the world's resources could, if fairly distributed and properly used, sharply reduce this exclusion.

In this context, a 'business as usual' approach is not only morally unacceptable but also dangerous. This underscores the urgent importance of building bridges between the 'included' and the 'excluded' in order to achieve social cohesion. Traditionally, voluntary service by the former in favour of the latter – what might be called 'philanthropic volunteering' – has played a vital role in this bridge-building.

Of late, however, a surprising trend has come to the fore: through voluntary service, excluded people are increasingly forging their own futures, and those of their societies at large. In this way the very people who have been excluded are breaking new ground in voluntary service and, in the process, probably enhancing social cohesion.

The goal of full social cohesion is a diverse world at peace with itself. Like any utopian objective, it will never be completely attained. Nevertheless such a goal provides hope, inspiration and direction to organisers of voluntary service.

Voluntary service by excluded people is perhaps not entirely new, but it has apparently never before been so widespread or visible. My purpose here is to explore briefly this trend and suggest how service by the excluded could be improved and expanded.

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Basic definitions

As a consequence of cross-cultural and cross-ideological differences and complexities, it is necessary to clarify at the outset the main terms used in this article.

'Exclusion' has been variously defined as involving one or more of the following factors: deprivation of basic needs such as shelter, education, health and employment, (International Labour Organisation, 2000); discrimination; disempowerment (concerning civic participation, for example); rejection by mainstream society and lack of knowledge, skills and self-esteem on the part of the rejected; exclusion for physical reasons such as handicaps; exclusion by age (the very young and the elderly); by reason of geography (isolated rural people, urban ghettos); gender and sexuality-related exclusion; exclusion from the consumption and creation of culture and communication; ethnic and/or racial exclusion; exclusion for anti-social behaviour; and so on.

'Cohesion', sometimes equated with 'inclusion', can be defined as the contrary. But unlike 'integration' or the French *insertion*, 'cohesion' does not necessarily imply that the non-excluded are expected to follow all mainstream rules, mores and norms. It suggests, rather, diverse, tolerant and mutually respectful rainbow societies. It stems from the Latin *cohaerere*, meaning literally 'stick together'. It refers thus to a kind of social mosaic, i.e. a collage of stones, each with its own characteristics, a work that is greater and can be more beautiful than the mere sum of its parts.

Etymologically, 'voluntary service' means 'to do willingly the work of a slave (*servus*)'. To be sure, the basic aim of a volunteer should not be material gain. But other educational, social and cultural benefits do accrue. Framed at the 1990 Congress on Volunteering, a *Universal Declaration on Voluntary Service* affirmed volunteers' 'faith in voluntary action as a creative and mediating force to respect the dignity of all people and their ability to live their lives and exercise their rights as citizens [and] help to solve social and environmental problems ...' (*Volontaires-Partenaires* 1992). In other words, no matter how humble, each stone in the mosaic can and may contribute to its overall beauty.

Is it not wishful thinking, however, for a policy maker or programmer to assume, for example, that a severely disabled person, or a prison inmate or a young person socially excluded on a number of grounds could, or would be willing and able to make a contribution to society by undertaking a stint of voluntary service? And so to contribute to social cohesion in general? The three examples prove that this may not be wishful thinking after all.

Three examples

A severely disabled person

From the time of the Vietnam War and ranging through decades of civil war until quite recently, military action has left the Cambodian countryside littered with unexploded anti-personnel mines. As a result, the country has an exceptionally large number of amputees and otherwise handicapped citizens. A UN Volunteers project there has been assisting with the development of a National Centre for Disabled People and a key actor in the project has been Carmen Reyes Zubiaga. Carmen is a UN Volunteer from the Philippines with more than two years' service at the Centre to her credit.

At first sight, the Centre looks like a café where tourists can drop in for a good meal and buy handicrafts. Project organisers deem it a success: it generally overflows with customers. In fact, however, the staff are disabled. In addition to offering on-site employment and training, the Centre provides support for the start-up of small businesses staffed by disabled people.

Indeed, the project's philosophy stems from the overall goal of empowerment: helping the disabled to help themselves. The Centre, says Carmen, 'is a model for change in the sense that all the disabled here work to be competitive in their fields. Employees here may be disabled, but they have to act as though they were not. It is

difficult, particularly at the start, but it is very important that they learn to help themselves first.'

Advocate as well as technician, Carmen explains that, 'My role is to complain so that the right words become actions. Eventually people get the point when they see the results.'

What is her assessment of the Centre's progress and her part in it? 'I am happy to see that the people of the Centre feel that this is their work, their property. If I have instilled this commitment and self-confidence, then I have done my job.' Of the Centre's members, she says: 'They are proud to be part of a growing organisation. In spite of their disabilities, they are motivated to learn and improve their skills. They serve as an inspiration to other disabled people.'

'They' includes Carmen who is wheelchair-bound herself. She plans to launch a similar project on her home island when she returns to the Philippines at the end of her United Nations Volunteers assignment (Perez-Buck 1998).

Prison inmates

Voluntary service by convicted law-breakers is not a new phenomenon. But it does seem to be spreading. One of its expressions is in services rendered solely inside penal institutions. In France, for example, there have been reports of prisoners involving themselves in activities such as recording audio cassettes for the blind (Petit 1986).

A complementary type of service by inmates could be called the 'half-way approach'.² For some 30 years, the American state of Georgia has offered detainees in its 22 prisons the opportunity to train, and then serve, as firemen with teams of local volunteers. This activity is not taken into account when decisions on parole are made, so it may be considered as genuine volunteering.

McRae, one of the towns where a prison is located, at first reacted with hostility to the plan to include prisoners among volunteer fire fighters. Later, however, the townspeople were reported to be much more at ease with the scheme, having seen how helpful the inmates have been. State-wide, in the year 2000, prisoners helped respond to 22 000 fire calls. Throughout the scheme's three decades, among the volunteer prisoner firemen there has not been a single escape attempt (FR-3 TV network 2001).

Excluded youth

Many individuals find themselves in multiple jeopardy, i.e. affected by several forms of exclusion. A recent thesis by Luis Amorim, *Un Projet Phare pour les Jeunes en Difficulté* (Amorim 1999), points to exciting conclusions about the functioning and results of an experimental project organised by the European Voluntary Service (EVS) programme at the end of the 1990s, under which intra-European exchanges took place involving young volunteers who were themselves subject to several kinds of exclusion: educational, geographical, medical, ethnic and legal, as well as in terms

of poverty or unemployment. These exchanges lasted over periods ranging from three to seven months and volunteers were placed in countries other than their own.

Luis Amorim formulated a triple hypothesis:

- That 'participation of the young people in EVS would contribute to a positive evolution of their self-image, particularly their personal and social image, and their self-esteem';
- That a 'stay abroad in the framework of a voluntary service programme would help them better express their individuality, equipping them with tools to face up to certain difficulties they may have experienced';
- That 'help furnished by more experienced youngsters – peer educators – to young people who are less confident and less well prepared to assume certain challenges can be a very important element in the development ... of new personal tools enabling them to overcome difficult situations.'

As with many experimental projects, the activity was not a complete success (see below). Luis Amorim does, however, make a convincing argument to the effect that its original hypotheses were, by and large, confirmed. He further concluded that 'the novelty of the experience, confronting [the young volunteers] with other cultures and persons, as well as new ideas and ways of doing things, [constitute] a powerful instrument for giving them more autonomy and above all more hope for the future.'

Concerning 'the future', it may be noted that most of the group studied found employment after – and at least partly as a result of – their stint of service.

Service and cohesion: What and how?

Occasionally, proponents of voluntary service tend to present it as something of a panacea: a single, relatively straightforward solution to many complex problems. We may need to be more (self)critical. In any event, the above vignettes are not trouble-free fairytales. If Carmen Reyes Zubiaga had to 'complain' so that words became action, there was clearly something to complain about.

Then, too, Luis Amorim found that the EVS experiment was not a complete success. Nearly one-third of the young people who volunteered for the project did not carry through with their original intention, and more than 70 per cent of the recruited and trained peer educators also deserted. One can all too easily imagine the kinds of disruption caused as a result.

Despite the problems encountered, the three examples (and lack of space precludes citing many more) do leave one with the impression that, somehow, volunteering by the excluded has enhanced social cohesion. But, more precisely on this theme, what seems to have happened and how? An attempt to answer these questions helps sketch out the skeleton of what might be called a 'typology of indicators of social cohesion' at least partly achieved by excluded people's voluntary service.

What has been achieved?

A first important common point is that through service, the excluded individuals achieved a clear degree of *empowerment*: from being passive members of society they at least started becoming actors.

Secondly, thanks to this transition, they appear to have gained a sense of *self-worth*. It is well-known that from a psychological point of view, many excluded people tend to internalise the causes of their exclusion. Often with a sense of guilt and/or inferiority, they may assume that their exclusion is somehow their own fault. To begin to contribute to society, rather than chiefly or solely receive from or depend upon society, can be an exhilarating bridge-crossing.

And thirdly, it can be a *healthily addictive change* with effects lasting after the period of service. No profiled tracer information is available on the Georgia prisoner-firemen. Nevertheless, the fact that in three decades none of the thousands who participated in the programme attempted to escape while serving outside penitentiary walls may suggest a vital attitude mutation. Furthermore, it is clear that her volunteering experience in Cambodia gave Carmen Reyes Zubiaga the inspiration, self-assurance and technical tools necessary to plan the launch of a similar activity on returning home to the Philippines. It is also clear that the EVS service stint encouraged and equipped most of the multiply-excluded and previously unemployed youngsters examined by Luis Amorim to find jobs afterwards.

So there appear to be three levels of change that can be induced by service among the excluded who volunteer. One is their freshly-empowered role in society: 'I'm now inside rather than outside and can influence what happens inside.' Another is attitudinal: 'I can give as well as take.' And a third is more technical: 'I've acquired experience and skills that enable me to continue as a more fully-fledged citizen.'

Returning to the 'mosaic' image used above: *before* service, the excluded individual may be seen as a stone wandering somewhat aimlessly in a social context that is indifferent or even hostile to it. *After* service, and perhaps to a decisive degree thanks to the service experience, he/she has become a stone that, while safeguarding, and even developing, its individuality, now fits in with and contributes to the beauty of the overall social picture. Voluntary service can be the 'cement' for such a cohesive mosaic.

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How?

There is no magic formula for mixing that 'cement'. But a number of factors do seem crucial.

First is the way excluded people are approached and encouraged to volunteer. The Georgia prisoners are informed from the outset that serving as volunteer firemen will not influence petitions for parole, for example. And it was made clear to candidates

for the EVS experimental project that service periods would be limited and non-renewable.

Secondly, special arrangements may be required – in addition to 'normal' service conditions – when the excluded volunteer for service. Thus, particular physical logistics may need to be set in place to facilitate volunteering by the disabled or the aged.

Thirdly, special measures may be necessary. *Before* a service stint, host institutions may need to be provided with profiled information on their new 'guests'. The volunteers themselves may require – as in the case of the Georgia prisoner/firemen – orientation or training. *During* service, trained 'peer educators' were found to be crucial success ingredients in the EVS experiment with multiply-excluded volunteers. And *after* volunteering, vocational and/or psychological and/or educational guidance and support can be necessary.

In summary, it seems that this approach can contribute to social cohesion on condition that special measures are taken by organisers. That implies extra cost, a caveat that may discourage or even dissuade the policy makers and programmers referred to above.

Costs, however, must be put into balance with benefits. One consideration here is that the benefits accruing to society and to the excluded who volunteer would not have existed had they *not* volunteered. One of the EVS volunteers studied by the *Un Projet Phare* thesis was Michael, 21 years old and from a rough Belfast neighbourhood where, jobless, he had been involved in drugs, street fighting and petty crime. He described the impact of his five months of service as a European Service Volunteer in Belgium like this: 'I don't know where I would be now in my life if it hadn't been for this.' Had Michael ended up on the dole for years, in a drug rehabilitation programme or prison, would non-volunteering not have cost him and his society more than the volunteer assignment that changed his life?

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Issues for further research

There are five issues for research and development that may be listed briefly:

- Analysis of the costs and benefits of voluntary service by the excluded could certainly help inform policy and programme decisions.
- Distributing information among relevant institutions and to the general public could assist in bringing this trend into the mainstream of voluntary service and of social action more generally.
- More understanding is needed of the 'what' and 'how' of volunteering by the semi-excluded compared with that of the gravely-excluded.

- The potential of partnerships focused on service volunteered by the excluded needs more exploration and experimentation. Such partnerships can be developed within and between governments, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, the private sector, and philanthropic bodies.
- The links between volunteering by the excluded and special institutions (educational, penal, medical) also need more systematic and pro-active examination.

A final word

Volunteering by the excluded does seem to offer a vast potential for enhancing social cohesion worldwide. It has been shown that it can benefit the individuals concerned and society at large. By addressing the issues just summarised, and others, policy makers and programme developers could help foster the realisation of that potential. To conclude, however, it is perhaps as well to recall that structural, informational, economic and other technical concerns should be balanced with a central focus on human beings.

Sister Brenda Walsh is involved with excluded people's volunteering under the Dominican Ministries at Racine, Wisconsin, USA. She replied as follows to the United Nations Volunteers survey on volunteering and social cohesion (Walsh 2000): 'I believe we need to rethink how we relate to the excluded and isolated. Can we become people of a second chance for those who need a fresh start? ... We need to see people with new eyes, not as useless loafers, cheaters, mentally ill, handicapped or old. Can we take people out of boxes and categories and allow them to be their best selves? ... Involving the weak and vulnerable can be a moral challenge and the litmus test of our society ... Volunteers can include those we have not looked upon as gifted people.'

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Notes

- ¹ This chapter is based on a discussion note prepared for the United Nations Volunteers Programme. It draws on documentation available in hard copy and on-line, including the responses to a United Nations Volunteers call-for-contributions addressed to 2 000 institutions and 8 000 individuals worldwide, received from Africa, Asia-Pacific, Commonwealth of Independent States (ex USSR) and Middle East, Europe, Latin America, North America and eight United Nations (UN) system sources.
- ² Voluntary participation in useful tasks by delinquents in institutions less repressive than prisons dates back at least to the Maxim Gorkii Colony, organised by Soviet pedagogue AS Makarenko to re-socialise post-Revolutionary 'rootless ones' (Makarenko translation ca. 1960). Today the half-way approach is also increasingly proposed to prison inmates.

