

Chapter 3

Volunteering in Global Perspective

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Volunteering time for a variety of purposes or caring and sharing has been a part of most societies throughout human history. The teachings of most major religions have supported care of the elderly, widows and orphans, and poor and otherwise dependent individuals. While most societies know these activities are ongoing along with other mutually supportive activities designed to build and support community, until recently, little attention has been paid to the role and contributions of volunteers. Data on volunteering is not regularly collected by governments, as is employment data. Although there is growing evidence of the contributions volunteers make to communities and society, there are few regular studies to document such assertions (Clotfelter, 1999). Practitioners assert that volunteers help to solve social and community problems, build social solidarity, and through organized citizens groups help to redress social wrongs, change public policy, and improve the quality of life of communities and nations. One of the purposes of the United Nations Year of Volunteers in 2001 was intended to address this information gap about volunteers and to encourage nations to conduct surveys of their volunteers and their activities.

Since the end of the Cold War, more attention is being paid to the development and preservation of democracy. Governments, including the United Nations, produce statistics on the roles and contributions of the government and market sectors to society, but until very recently, little has been known about the contributions of citizens to society. We are indebted to our eastern and central European colleagues for introducing the term “civil society” by which they meant that public space in societies, generally democratic societies, between government and the market where citizens could debate ideas, serve various causes, research, engage in

political and social action, advocate and or protest, sing in choirs, associate in diverse kinds of organizations, serve others in need, educate, recreate, and generally participate and contribute to the life of their communities.

In its statement on the role of volunteering in social development, the Commission for Social Development of the United Nations Economic and Social Council stated:

Volunteering constitutes an enormous reservoir of skills, energy and local knowledge which can assist Governments in carrying out more targeted, efficient, participatory and transparent public programs and policies. However, it is unusual for volunteering to be recognized as a strategic resource that can be positively influenced by public policy and even rarer for it to be factored into national and international development strategies. . . . The International Year of Volunteers (2001) offers a unique opportunity in bridging the gap between the acknowledgment of a long-standing tradition on the one hand, and a recognition of its potential as a major asset for promoting social development on the other.¹

What do we know about volunteers in various nations? The first part of this chapter is devoted to an overview of volunteering globally using recent survey findings from the European Values Survey data and the World Values Survey data (EVS/WVS). This overview will address the rate and scope of volunteering in various countries and patterns of volunteering in those countries related to level of income and freedom ratings. Then the chapter will explore various characteristics of volunteers compared with non-volunteers in four categories: (1) religious activity, (2) membership, (3) social networks, and (4) political engagement.

THE RATE AND SCOPE OF VOLUNTEERING IN VARIOUS COUNTRIES

In an era of globalization and democratization taking place in many nations around the world, many governments have realized that they alone cannot provide all services and that citizen participation and initiative is important in the provision of many services, in maintaining community, and in building mutual trust and social solidarity. What once was invisible—volunteering or the voluntary gift of time to a variety of causes to serve public and social purposes—is rapidly being recognized as the glue that helps hold societies together and as an additional resource of use in solving social and community problems.

¹ Report of the Commission for Social Development, December 2000. United Nations publication, Sales No. E/CN.5/32001/6 Annex, p. 3–4.

There is growing evidence that nonprofit and voluntary organizations and activities are rapidly increasing around the world. Lester M. Salamon (1994), director of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, has argued that we are in the midst of a "global associational revolution" that is one of the important characteristics of societies in the late twentieth century as the development of the powerful nation-state was in the late nineteenth century. He, along with colleagues in many countries is mapping this sector and more recently volunteers and their value in various economies. Such an effort was started early in the 1980s in the United States with the first publication of *Dimensions of the Independent Sector* (now the *Nonprofit Almanac*) in 1985 (see, for example, Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1996b).

In another effort, scholars have collected data on membership and volunteering in the European Values Surveys (EVS) since the late 1970s under the auspices of a foundation, the European Value Systems Study Group which is composed of a group of academics from various European nations. The 1999–2000 EVS surveys are coordinated from Tilburg University. The World Values Surveys, which built upon the EVS, covered countries outside of Europe and are coordinated by the University of Michigan. The first global study was carried out in 1991 in coordination with the EVS survey. Since then, WVS waves were carried out in 1995–1997 and the most recent wave in 1999–2002. From a total of 26 countries in Europe and North and South America in 1981, the 1999–2002 waves of the EVS/WVS surveys will eventually have data from 73 nations covering over 80 percent of the world's population. In the current survey conducted by both EVS and WVS (circa 1999–2002), 23 new countries were added. The data in this overview are from those 47 countries whose data collection has been completed from the 1999–2002 surveys. The questionnaire in the EVS/WVS survey included a few questions on membership in organizations and volunteering. This is one of the few comparative survey efforts covering so many countries in different regions of the world. The questions in the survey related to membership and volunteering were quite limited. For example, no questions were asked related to the amount of time people spent volunteering; nor what they did when they volunteered. The list of types of organizations and activities for volunteers provided in these surveys were determined before there was a serious attempt to classify volunteer activity. As such, there is little comparability with more in depth studies on volunteering, such as those in the United States (see Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1996a) and some surveys on giving and volunteering completed in the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (Salamon et al., 1999). However, the World Values surveys are a rich source of data for researchers on changing social and political values covering countries on all six continents, thus giving broad coverage on volunteer and membership rates. Furthermore, in the 1999–2002 wave, an additional question was added related to social capital.



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The Values of Volunteering
Cross-Cultural Perspectives
Dekker, P.; Halman, L. (Eds.)
2003, XIV, 226 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-0-306-47737-9