

## **Preface: Reflections Based on Practice**

More than 30 years of participation as a volunteer and advisor to volunteer organizations and social help groups in Mexico motivated me to pose different questions about this work. This activity has allowed me to observe visible effects in the attitudes of those who are devoted to a cause and are able to dedicate part of their lives to serving others. I consider myself to be a witness to the advances, not only on the part of the people doing volunteer work, but also on the part of the groups and individuals who receive the fruits from that work. As the product of an effort that involves sharing resources and experience, these transformations have many times been mutual, which shows that changes are possible and that it is probable that there is a relation between the way they are initiated and their results. It also seems to suggest that it is relevant to understand the way that volunteers work both inside and outside of the organizational structures of social help groups.

At the same time, among solidarity and voluntary activities, I have observed many impositions affecting the rights and lives of others, with the excuse of helping and of satisfying unfelt needs. I have seen resources of time and energy wasted, where egoism and the desire to be the center of attention are so great that they obscure any attempt to serve. In the name of “development” and “progress”, many times what is achieved is simply to disorient the people assisted and leave them in a precarious state when the “project” undertaken disappears. This is why it is essential to learn how to do this work in a professional and respectful way, with greater awareness of the responsibility it implies.

My personal experience in the field of voluntary action has had an important impact on my perceptions concerning attitudes of solidarity and my own actions in this regard. Once, in a Mexico City neighborhood marked by the lack of resources, we decided, together with a group of young people, to work jointly to build a house for an elderly man in that community. Every Saturday morning, our group came to work on that project. A woman from the neighborhood helped us, bringing rice water and hibiscus flower drinks for the young people and working together with us, laying brick. One day, sweating under the sun, the woman and I stopped to think: there were big social differences between the two of us, but in human terms we were the same, just people.

We shared concerns about what our children were doing, about the city’s pollution, the future, and death. We saw ourselves as two human beings doing something

for someone else, working together, shoulder to shoulder, simply because we chose to do so. That day we decided that each one of us – within our own worlds and with the resources available – would continue doing “something” for others, because it was a good way to live, because we agreed it was worth the time and life invested in it, and also because we felt useful and satisfied.

We agreed that the path of service and solidarity may be the path of accompanying and facilitating processes, of being a witness and companion – offering what one is, and at times, what one has – of being available to..., open to..., present...; what it finally shows us is that you cannot live for another, grow or suffer for another, but it is possible to be with and be there for another person.

In practice, it is possible to dispose of common resources by means of encounters and relationships. Solidarity and voluntary activity open the door to infinite possibilities for sharing and growing, not only as individuals, but as a society.

The experience of voluntary action led me to embark on a long road that made me to pose questions, now no longer from *praxis*, but rather from within the university. I had to go back to the classroom and obtain the academic degrees necessary to back up my writing and inquiries. The sparse information available about voluntary practices in Mexico was the motivation for beginning a process that would provide an account of these activities. I recognized that the good intentions that we assume to be implicit in participation in acts of solidarity were not enough; it was necessary to dig away at what this activity represents specifically for present-day Mexican society. It was evident that in order to approach and deal with these kinds of actions, a profound review and a theoretical basis were necessary that only the objective point of view of academic research is able to offer. In order to look for support for a nation-wide project covering this subject, it was essential to convince researchers in different fields of its importance, so that they might contribute their experience and knowledge to achieving this objective.

The study presented here represents this journey. We think that it is time to reflect on and pay attention to this relational and associative phenomenon that – it seems – may change, in some way, the way in which we participate with one another to build that which we call citizenship and democracy. Those are big words. Our contribution does not attempt to be so ambitious, but we do not consider it to be any less important because of that. In our research, the interactions that occur in acts of solidarity and volunteer work in Mexico are the motive; understanding what happens in and through them is the challenge.

## General Organization of the Text

As editor, I have organized this text keeping in mind the complexity involved in articulating it for a broad public consisting of those who study this sector, as well as those interested in it due to their practice. As I mentioned earlier, the research that gave rise to this text was an effort that combined my experience and knowledge of the sector as a practitioner and researcher involved with it, together with that of

specialists from many different social science disciplines, in which we have collaborated in order to structure a far-reaching research project. The process of doing the research was carried out by parts, in which the members of the team that was organized worked and took responsibility for their particular parts. The result is that this text includes chapters prepared by each one of the members of the team. It should be noted that the opinions expressed in this book are the responsibility of each one of the authors.

In my role as the general coordinator for the project, I devoted myself to the task of establishing overall guidelines and concerns for the project, as well as the theoretical concerns underlying it, while at the same time I was responsible for drawing up the survey and conducting two of the case studies.

While compiling the text, I considered it to be appropriate to organize it based on the National Survey on Solidarity and Volunteer Action (ENSAV, Spanish acronym), and then to consider the members participating in groups of volunteers, and conclude with an attempt to characterize the organizations wherein these members participate. Finally, by this means, I seek to provide the reader with an overall picture of the volunteer actions and acts of solidarity that are carried out by different groups in Mexican society.

In Chap. 1, I present the background of this research effort and establish the theoretical basis, the assumptions, hypotheses, definitions, and general concepts that guide and underlie the study. An international and regional panorama of these activities is also provided, and a focus is provided – by means of some historical background on the third sector in Mexico – on the state of knowledge concerning volunteer actions and acts of solidarity in Mexico.

In Chap. 2, the National Survey on Solidarity and Volunteer Action (ENSAV) is analyzed. This survey was conducted among the over 18-year-old population and is the first attempt to determine the characteristics of this sector in the case of Mexico. At the beginning of the chapter, both the historical and cultural reasons for some generalized precepts about solidarity and voluntary activities by Mexicans are presented. Then the methodological procedure used for preparing this survey is explained. Following this, a detailed analysis is presented that covers each one of the substantive questions in the survey, aimed at responding to some of the main concerns related to the extent of volunteer actions and acts of solidarity in the country, their main activities, their geographical distribution, and the time that Mexicans invest in them.

Chapters 3–5 analyze the results of 15 case studies that include a total of 66 in-depth interviews with people who participate in nonprofit organizations, as well as with one person performing acts of solidarity as an individual. Chapter 3 explains the methodology employed for carrying out the qualitative part of the project. The characteristics of the case studies among nonprofit organizations are discussed, and the information derived from 66 in-depth interviews with people who are members of these organizations in which groups of volunteers hold different positions is then analyzed.

The socio-demographic characteristics of those interviewed are also analyzed, the individual trajectories and life experiences of those who participate in volunteer

groups are discussed, the importance and significance that the subjects attribute to their activities is delved into, as well as the process by which these individuals give new meaning to these activities in their daily lives. There is also an analysis of the conceptual map presented in the chapter, where some specific hypotheses arise from the relations among the codes noted which allows a better understanding of volunteer attitudes based on what each of them has expressed.

Chapter 4 returns to the 66 interviews included in 15 case studies of nonprofit organizations, and one point in particular is analyzed: the act of giving. The majority (98.48%) of those interviewed – whether volunteers or not – who participate in the organizations studied expressed that this kind of action was the most meaningful one for them. A conceptual map of volunteer actions is included in the chapter, and the act of giving is analyzed based on the expressions of those interviewed from the standpoint of different theoretical perspectives.

Chapter 5 discusses the characteristics of the organizations that provided the subject matter for 14 case studies carried out in different regions of the country and oriented toward different spheres of action. The data is organized in terms of four main themes: how the organizations began and the kind of objectives expressed when they started out; the goals proposed and accomplished during their efforts; the characteristics of the structure with which they have operated, and their decision-making process, as well as their mode of financing.

Finally, in Chap.6, the fundamental discoveries of this research are brought together. The main ideas of the study are posed and the data and contributions of both the survey and the case studies are presented, as well as verification of the hypotheses of the research. Based on the results obtained, challenges and recommendations are proposed in relation to the government and the market in order to promote volunteer actions and acts of solidarity. Future actions corresponding to both organized civil society and those who express their solidarity and participate in these activities in an informal way are also proposed.

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