

How many people volunteer in Australia and why do they do it?

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Introduction

Governments of all persuasions are promoting volunteering as part of their social policy platforms. Some of the reasons for this were examined in a previous Briefing Paper (Zappalà 2000). Policies that promote volunteering are about influencing the extent or numbers of people engaging in voluntary activity. A key factor that can affect the success of any such policy is whether governments or nonprofit organisations can influence the motivations that drive people to undertake voluntary activity.

This Briefing Paper examines the evidence on two key dimensions of volunteering in Australia:

- The extent of volunteering and factors influencing its rise or decline;
- The reasons people volunteer.

It concludes by highlighting their implications for organisations and government policy on volunteering.

The extent of volunteering in Australia

Volunteering is an activity that is freely chosen, does not involve remuneration, and helps or benefits strangers. The most detailed source on the extent of volunteering in Australia is the first and only national survey conducted by the ABS in June 1995, the *Survey of Voluntary Work* (ABS 1996). From a sample of 56,000 people usually surveyed as part of the Monthly Population Survey, data was collected for the 10,600 people who claimed to have undertaken some form of voluntary activity in the previous twelve months. The survey collected data on the characteristics of volunteers, the type of voluntary work performed for up to three of the organisations for which people volunteered, the type of activities volunteers performed, the volume of hours worked, the benefits people gained from volunteering and how they were recruited.

This survey suggested that 19 per cent of the civilian population aged 15 years and over had provided some form of voluntary work through an organisation or group during the 12 months ended June 1995. Almost two-thirds of volunteers worked for one organisation only, and 54 per cent of all volunteer hours were accounted for by volunteers working for organisations in welfare/community, religious and educational sectors.

A national survey of Australian workplaces found that volunteers were present in 14 per cent of Australian workplaces, and accounted for almost 10 per cent of all employees (Morehead et al 1997:47). The number of volunteers was almost 50 per cent higher than the number of homeworkers/outworkers, contractors and agency workers put together. Volunteers were primarily concentrated in the Education, and Health and community services sector.

Is volunteering declining?

Whether there has been an increase or decrease in the extent of volunteering in Australia depends on whether we examine formal (e.g. volunteering through a nonprofit organisation) or informal (e.g. volunteering for neighbours or friends) types of volunteering. Relying primarily on measures of formal volunteering one study found that the volunteer rate (the percentage of the population aged 15 or over who report volunteering for an organisation at least once during previous 12 months) had declined in the four states examined since the 1980s (Lyons & Fabiansson 1998). They also found, however, that there had occurred an increase in the average hours and the total hours worked by volunteers. In other words, while a smaller proportion of the Australian population is volunteering, those who do volunteer are doing so for longer hours.

People who volunteer for more than 300 hours per year or 6 hours per week on average have been referred to as Highly Committed Volunteers (HCV) (Lyons & Hocking 2000). HCVs are argued to be particularly

important for the continuous functioning of civil society, even though they account for just under 3 per cent of the population aged 15 or over. HCVs are more likely to be female than male, just under half are between 35 and 54 years of age and just over half being 45 years of age or older. The majority are born in Australia, and just over half live in capital cities. Almost half have no post school qualifications, although one-third have a degree or diploma. Forty per cent are not in the labour force, while just over one-third are in full-time employment (of whom 73% are in white-collar jobs). Many HCVs are found in the field of sport and recreation and community and welfare services.

In contrast to trends based on measures of formal volunteering, research based on broader measures that include informal volunteering activity suggest that the extent of volunteering has increased in Australia in the 1990s. This research is based on the ABS surveys of time use in Australia, which include voluntary time given informally to other households. An analysis of these data suggests that there has been a 30 per cent increase in time spent on volunteering between 1992 and 1997, making it the fastest growing sector of work in Australia over the half-decade. This increase has been primarily attributed to the fact that 'women [are] spending more time providing physical and emotional support for elderly, sick or disabled adults' (Ironmonger 2000:4).¹

Reasons for the decline in formal volunteering

Despite the increase in informal volunteering, volunteering through organisations would seem to be declining. In examining the possible reasons for this decline researchers have found:

- little or no evidence to support the hypothesis that it is due to the fact that more married women are engaged in full or part-time work and thus less able to undertake voluntary work, as the rate of decline is greater for men;
- that while there is some evidence of an urban/rural effect (volunteering has traditionally been higher in rural areas) in NSW, this was not the case for other states (in fact Brisbane has a higher volunteering rate than the rest of Queensland) (Lyons & Fabiansson 1998).

A more recent paper suggests that the future trend for volunteering will depend on the impact of a range of demographic and socioeconomic factors, including:

- the decline in the number of women having children, likely to adversely impact on volunteering;²
- the decline in the number of people living in regional Australia, likely to adversely impact on volunteering;
- the increase in the number of people with degrees or diplomas, likely to positively impact on volunteering; and
- the aging of the population and the corresponding tendency of men not to be in paid employment when they are in their fifties, also likely to positively impact on volunteering (Lyons & Hocking 2000:13).

While demographic and socioeconomic factors are significant, the future prospects for volunteering will also

depend on the changing attitudes and motivations of people. In brief, why do people volunteer and what factors (including government policy) are likely to change this motivational profile?

Why do people volunteer?

Volunteering seems to defy most people's assumptions about what drives human action especially as it often involves work that is trying, unpaid and time consuming (Clary & Snyder 1991). A key debate in the literature is whether volunteering can be defined as 'truly' altruistic behaviour. It has been argued that altruism is only one of several reasons that explain why people volunteer (for example, others may relate to tradition, status and reciprocity). A dominant approach to analysing volunteer motivations is concerned with:

...the needs being met, the motives being fulfilled, and social and psychological functions being served by the activities of those people who engage in volunteer work (Clary & Snyder 1991:123).

An advantage of this approach is that it allows a wide range of factors to be involved in understanding the complex interrelations of volunteer motivations. Six categories of motivations or psychological functions that may be met by volunteering have been identified (Clary et al 1996):

1. Values function: people may volunteer to express or act on values important to the self (e.g. altruism);
2. Understanding function: people may volunteer as they see it as an opportunity to increase their knowledge of the world and develop and practice particular skills;
3. Enhancement function: volunteering may allow people to engage in psychological development and enhance their self esteem;
4. Career function: people may volunteer to gain experiences that will benefit their careers;
5. Social function: volunteering may help people 'fit in' and get along with social groups they value;
6. Protective function: volunteering may help people cope with inner anxieties and conflicts.

Using a survey instrument known as the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), researchers have been able to confirm the validity of these six categories. A United States study found that the most important functions served by volunteering were Values, followed by Enhancement, Social and Understanding motivations. The least important motivations were found to be Protective and Career motivations. The study also demonstrated how volunteers' motivations vary according to a range of demographic variables (e.g. sex,

1. A study based on the Australian component of the International Social Science Survey found that one-third of Australians volunteered on a regular basis. It was not clear from the question asked, however, whether this referred to formal or informal types of volunteering (Evans & Kelley 2000).
2. Parents tend to be involved in voluntary activities centred on providing services for their children.

ethnicity, education, age and income), and volunteer behaviour (e.g. type of volunteering, time spent volunteering, length of experience as a volunteer and so on) (Clary et al 1996).

What do we know about volunteer motivations in Australia? A study of volunteers in the welfare sector found that altruism was the most frequently mentioned motive, followed by social interaction, personal growth and skills for paid work (Vellekoop-Baldock 1990:98). Baldock concluded that the very fact that there was a multiplicity of motives weakened the traditional role attributed to altruism:

...volunteers themselves invoke altruism as part of an accepted vocabulary of motives, partly because the ideology of volunteerism assumes the need for altruism, partly because no other motives can be admitted to (Vellekoop-Baldock 1990:102-3).

Table 1 lists in rank order people's reasons for becoming a volunteer based on the ABS Survey of Voluntary Work. It also suggests that people volunteer for a wide range of reasons, and consistent with other studies, those that can be classified as 'altruistic' tend to be given greater prominence.

Table 1		Reasons for becoming a volunteer
Reason	Percentage of volunteers stating reason*	
Help others/community	41	
Personal/family involvement	33	
Personal satisfaction	27	
To do something worthwhile	23	
Social contact	16	
Felt obliged/just happened	13	
Use skills/experience	11	
To be active	11	
Religious beliefs	9	
Other	7	
To learn new skills	6	
Gain work experience/reference	5	

Source: ABS (1996:19)

Notes: * figures do not add to 100% as more than one reason could be given

A study of Australian volunteers over age 65, found that people 'volunteer for both altruistic and egoistic reasons, based in part on an assessment of the costs and benefits of volunteering' (Warburton 1997:169). Non-altruistic reasons included: feeling useful, being busy and active, and meeting people. Many volunteers also expressed feeling a moral obligation to volunteer, reciprocating or 'paying back' society, as well as noting the influence of family background (parents had volunteered), and religious beliefs. Another survey of volunteers in Adelaide found that while the majority stated they volunteered for altruistic reasons (e.g. to help people, improve conditions in society), almost two-thirds stated they volunteered 'to gain a sense of satisfaction', and almost half stated meeting people as a reason for volunteering (Baum et al 1999:16).

In summary, while altruism is a valid motive it is not necessarily the only or 'privileged' motive for undertaking volunteer work. People may volunteer for reasons that may be seen as purely 'selfish' without any diminution in the level of commitment they may show to the organisation they volunteer for.

Related to motivations for volunteering are specific events or paths that may precipitate volunteer work. Becoming a volunteer occurs at specific stages in a person's life cycle and is often precipitated by specific events (e.g. the death of a partner, severe illness or illness of a close friend, children leaving home, or unemployment) (Vellekoop-Baldock 1990; Warburton 1997). Three broad paths into volunteering in Australia have been identified:

- A path that opens for people in their thirties and forties with dependent children. Parents tend to be involved in voluntary activities centred on providing services for their children.
- People in rural and regional Australia may tend to be more involved in voluntary activities and organisations because of the relative lack of services compared to capital cities.
- A third path is one '...which opens for people who are committed to working with others in the interests of some form of public good.' (Lyons & Hocking 2000:11).

Policy and organisational implications

The success of government and organisational policies to promote volunteering, and hence increase its extent, depends to a large degree on the factors that motivate people to volunteer. Existing research suggests that the motivations and paths that may influence people to volunteer are complex and varied. Furthermore they often relate to individuals' personal needs. Hence increasing the extent of volunteering may not be susceptible to macro-level policy changes or influences. As one study of volunteering among retired people concluded:

[V]olunteering is a personal decision based on fairly stable factors and belief systems, as well as on the circumstances of individual lives. The inclination to volunteer appears to be a long-term characteristic, based on internal motivation, and not affected by the current political environment (Warburton 1997:171).

Policies may not only need to target various subsets of the possible volunteering population (e.g. the young, the aged) but cater to the different volunteering 'functions' that particular 'groups' may have. The Smith Family recently conducted a modified version of the VFI survey of its volunteers. This will assist TSF to develop policies that will meet the different needs of our volunteer staff. These include training accreditation programs for volunteers, recognition programs, volunteer charters and 'contracts'. A more detailed discussion of these policies as well as the factors that motivate TSF volunteers will be the subject of forthcoming publications.

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ISSN: 1444-7568
ISBN: 1 876833 07 6