

# The Future Prospect for Volunteering: Why My Glass is Half Empty

Colin Rochester

## What kind of volunteering are we talking about?

I think we need to begin by asking ourselves exactly what it is we are feeling optimistic or pessimistic about. Volunteering is not a simply, single phenomenon but one that is multi-faceted and takes a number of forms. There are at least three dimensions to this multi-layered complexity.

In the first place we can distinguish between three different *areas of activity* – while much of the literature focuses on volunteering as unpaid work or service, we also need to pay attention to two other worlds - of activism and serious leisure.

Again much of the discussion of the volunteering experience tends to focus on the minority of volunteers whose activities are *managed* (usually by paid staff) but we should not lose sight of the much greater numbers of volunteers who are *unmanaged*.

And there are at least three main roles that volunteers and volunteering can play in social policy. These are: (a) as a supplement or reinforcement of the status quo; (b) as an alternative way of responding to social need; or (c) a means of challenging the way things are

## What are the criteria for the assessing the health and vitality?

For more than twenty years there has been a fair measure of agreement about the nature of the ‘enduring challenges’ faced by volunteering and we might calibrate our degree of optimism or pessimism according to how well we think they are being addressed or are likely to be tackled in the future. The challenges are:

- The need to change the image of volunteering
- Making volunteering inclusive
- Maintaining the independence of voluntary action; and
- Defending the spirit of volunteering from formalisation

## But we can also appeal to more fundamental values

In the first place we should note that the basic idea of volunteering is at odds with a powerful political project that is driving us towards a ‘market society’ in which transactions are given a monetary value. Volunteering is a gift (although some organisations have explored setting a price for it).

And there are other values associated with volunteering which we need to cultivate and protect in the teeth of some prevailing currents of thought and action. These include

- *altruism* – the moral imperative of compassion or care for other people;
- *solidarity* – a feeling of identification with a group and a responsibility of contributing to the well-being of other members of the group; *reciprocity* – in which helping others brings help from others in turn; and
- *equity* and *social justice* which are based on the belief that injustice and inequality are morally wrong and need to be addressed or eliminated.

To extent to which we believe we can we protect these distinctive values of volunteering in a neo-liberal market society will define our place on the optimism-pessimism scale.

### **The role of Government – direct and indirect impacts**

To what extent do the policies and activities of government contribute to or detract from the vitality of volunteering. They take two forms, those - like the programmes and initiatives launched by successive administrations - that impact directly on the practice of volunteering and those that have a more indirect impact

*Direct impact:* experience shows that government initiatives achieve very little and we don't want or need them for two reasons. In the first place – governments are bad at designing and delivering programmes and projects like national citizens service and community organising. In the second, governments should not be interfering; it is not for them to decide the aims and the priorities for volunteering.

I believe that the *indirect impact* of government policies and actions is more important and worth more of our attention. Potentially they can make an important contribution to creating a climate that favours volunteering and to removing obstacles to involvement

### **Some concluding thoughts**

There will be an increased need for volunteering to address the problems of an unequal society and greater gaps in the provision of social welfare and public facilities. This might involve all of the social policy roles of supplementing provision; finding different ways of meeting need; and challenging the status quo.

But attempts to play these roles will be made more difficult by the Inhospitable climate in which we will have to operate - where inequality will grow and society will increasingly be organised on market principles undermining the basic principles and values on which volunteering is based.

In this climate volunteering will be challenged on a number of levels:

- At the practical level of accessing basic resources such as a room in which to meet where market rents put the price beyond the pocket of many groups.
- In a culture where volunteering is increasingly seen as self-interested and of greatest benefit to the volunteer
- In a political and social environment which marginalises activism; and
- In a society where volunteering will come to be seen as abnormal or even deviant behaviour.