
VOLUNTEERING: A CATALYST FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL INCLUSION, AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

HOW CAN WE BETTER UNDERSTAND THE ROLE VOLUNTEERING PLAYS IN strengthening citizen engagement, social inclusion, and building resilient communities? Reflecting on some of the transitions within the voluntary sector and trends in volunteer engagement that have emerged over the past five years will help us map out where we want voluntary action to be when we celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary, in 2017.

Some have suggested that the word "volunteering" is out-dated and connotes an elitist, patronizing, and charitable model of giving time. Others feel that volunteering has become too purposeful and that altruism needs to be the primary motivation for contributing to the community. We argue that the concept of volunteering needs to be redefined to encompass a more inclusive and reciprocal form of engagement.

There has been a renewed interest in volunteering among governments, businesses, and the educational system, and we have seen an enormous increase in mandatory community service, community service learning, and employer-supported volunteering. However, the need for these sectors to respond with even bolder, innovative, and more collaborative volunteer engagement strategies becomes clear when examining Canada's volunteer landscape and considering the impact of changing demographics.

We set the context for Canada's voluntary sector landscape by examining demographic shifts and societal drivers, and highlighting efforts to support today's volunteers through public policy and corporate citizenship. Exploring the role of citizen engagement, social inclusion, and resilient communities, we will proceed to highlight the vast spectrum of volunteer engagement in Canadian communities. As a springboard for ongoing dialogue, we will present key trends and challenges in volunteering and suggest strategies for the future.

TRANSITIONS IN THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR: A NEW LANDSCAPE FOR VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

Volunteering in Canada continues to be embedded into our way of life, and we are exploring this issue from a position of great strength. More than 13.3 million Canadians, or 47% of those over the age of 15, volunteer an average of 156 hours each year. Together they contributed 2.1 billion hours in 2010 alone (Statistics Canada, 2012). The volun-

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teer rate has increased from 31% in 1997 (Statistics Canada, 1998); however, the average number of volunteer hours has begun to level off. This may be an early sign that we are engaging a broader group of people in a wider range of volunteer opportunities, making volunteering more inclusive and communities less vulnerable by not relying so heavily on a small group of people. As we will see, this would bode well given our shifting demographics with an aging and increasingly diverse population.

Canada's voluntary sector is being increasingly shaped by aging baby boomers, who now make up one third of Canada's population. There are concerns about having enough qualified people to meet labour market demand and also questions about whether baby boomers will be able to fill the shoes of today's senior volunteers. Seniors volunteer more hours per year (223) than other age groups (156 hours per year for all age groups). They are loyal to the organizations and causes they believe in, and volunteer primarily to contribute to the community as well as for social reasons. That being said, while older adults contribute more hours per year, Canada's youth (aged 15–24) have the highest volunteer rate (58%) (Statistics Canada, 2012).

Volunteer engagement can provide important bridges within and among communities as Canada becomes increasingly diverse. Today, 20% of the Canadian population is foreign-born, and immigration being projected to account for 100 per cent of net growth in the domestic labour force in the next decade (Kukushikin & Watt, 2009). The growing role of newcomers to Canada provides an important and strategic consideration for organizations seeking to engage volunteers from various cultures (Volunteer Canada, 2012a). There is also an important opportunity to further engage Aboriginal and First Nations communities in volunteerism to ensure that organizations provide culturally suitable services. We are at a critical juncture in the voluntary sector, and need to ensure that we support meaningful volunteer opportunities in this changing landscape.

DRIVING VOLUNTEERING

There have been intentional strategies to support and promote volunteering and the voluntary sector through public policy in all provinces and territories in Canada (Campbell & Speevak Sladowski, 2009). Many governments have established initiatives to strengthen their relationship with the voluntary sector in their jurisdictions and to address legislative and capacity issues facing voluntary organizations (Carter & Speevak Sladowski, 2008). Every province and territory has Volunteer Service Awards through their governments, Lieutenant Governors, or Commissioners. A number of provinces also have Ministers with volunteerism as part of their portfolio or government branches with an explicit mandate to promote and support volunteering.

There has also been enormous growth in the number of mandatory community service programs across Canada. Some provinces require community service hours in order to graduate high school or receive social assistance, or as an alternative to prison sentences. Many colleges and universities have developed community service learning courses and co-curricular activities that involve placements in nonprofit organizations. (For more information about community service learning, see www.communityservicelearning.ca.) This link to education recognizes the skills development and promotion of citizenship that volunteering offers.

Corporate citizenship is another avenue through which volunteering has been supported as companies integrate employer-supported volunteering into their corporate donations and sponsorships. Along with the benefits of connecting with community and contributing to quality of life, volunteering is also recognized as a means of improving employee morale. It has become a form of staff development, where managers seek out volunteer opportunities in order to help employees develop specific skills and competencies such as leadership, team building, logistics, or public speaking. Collaboration in corporate citizenship has increased between companies at local and national levels and amidst an increasing professionalization of corporate citizenship staff positions and stand-alone units in many companies (Mitchell, 2012).

One key driver that has served to support an evolving notion of citizenship and volunteering among governments, businesses, and voluntary organizations is information technology. Technology is increasingly being used to create new types of volunteer arrangements as online databases, online discussions, and social media help organizations to connect with, recruit, and engage volunteers from all demographics. Public and private organizations are drawing on their own internal databases for volunteer opportunities. There has also been increased cross promotion of opportunities between and within sectors. Volunteering is becoming less confined to geographic boundaries, as seen in the blossoming of micro-volunteering, virtual volunteering, and armchair activism. These highlight the diverse forms of making contributions, large and small, to the global community without having to leave one's home or commit to more than the present moment.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND VOLUNTEERING

Governments, businesses, and voluntary organizations have recognized the importance of citizen engagement. Regardless of the purpose and scope, there are four basic forms of citizen engagement (Arnstein, 1969): awareness, input, participation, and service.

Efforts to raise awareness about an issue, program, or product are intended to influence public behaviour. Consultations, focus groups, surveys, and online forums are all designed to get input from the public about new directions, programs, and policy development. Inviting people to participate in planning initiatives, special events, and ongoing programs can provide opportunities for more direct involvement and build more ongoing relationships. When people are engaged in the service itself as leaders, supporters, employees, and advisors, they have opportunities to co-create and shape their communities, organizations, businesses, and society.

Governments have identified the benefits of place-based decision-making (Harcourt, 2006). People are best equipped to understand the conditions, issues, and assets in their local communities and to assess what solutions and resources are best suited to address their unique circumstances. Businesses want to involve citizens as employees, consumers, and investors and see themselves as corporate citizens within communities. Voluntary organizations work in local communities and have direct connections with people as clients, participants, volunteers, donors, and supporters. Two of the most significant features of the transition within the voluntary sector are (1) increased recognition of the role the sector plays in mobilizing citizens and (2) increased collaboration with and

blurring of the lines between other sectors. The various forms of citizen engagement within this context are depicted in the graphic below:

Spectrum of engagement



SOCIAL INCLUSION

Basic human needs include connection to others, a sense of belonging, and the needs to have one's views understood and taken into account. The majority of Canadians have a strong sense of belonging to their country (88%), a large number (81%) feel connected to their province or territory, and 70% have a strong sense of belonging to their community (Statistics Canada, 2003b).

According to Statistics Canada (2003a), "A feeling of belonging to a country, region, and local community can influence people's sense of identity and the extent to which they participate in society. Generally, a strong sense of belonging is positively associated with better self-reported physical and mental health. A strong sense of belonging also contributes to individual and community well-being."

Yet some people face barriers to social inclusion and may experience marginalization. These include newcomers (Waylan, 2006), consumers of mental health services, the homeless, and the homebound: "These problems point to the need for community building, leadership skills development, and civic education within newcomer communities. They underscore the need for a public policy agenda supportive of social inclusion, not only through public education regarding rights and responsibilities but also via respect for cultural pluralism and improved accessibility to democratic institutions and policy-makers" (p. 21). There have been many successful volunteer programs that intentionally reach out, raise awareness, and provide support mechanisms to help people get involved. Social inclusion through volunteering is a promising strategy because it focuses on what people have to offer as opposed to what they may need. It can be empowering to see oneself both as a contributor as well as a consumer of community services.

At Imagine Canada's National Summit in November 2011, Volunteer Canada facilitated a session on strengthening volunteering in which the notion of volunteering was explored. Many said that they did not view their involvement in the community as volunteering but simply as an expression of their citizenship, part of living in a community, or what one does to shape the society one wants to live in. Others were concerned about the

fading but residual perception of volunteering as an exclusive and elitist activity – something one does if one is fortunate enough to have leisure time. It has been highlighted that those with higher family incomes and higher levels of education, and those who attend religious worship services regularly are more likely to volunteer (Statistics Canada, 2012). In 2010, more than half (53%) of all volunteer hours were contributed by only 10% of volunteers (Statistics Canada, 2012). Volunteering has the potential to expand beyond this base through the use of intentional strategies. By recognizing and reinforcing the strengths, energy, and perspectives that all people bring, we make space for everyone to play their part and have their say.

RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

Having more volunteers and more diverse and engaged citizens is not the end goal but, rather, a vehicle to and a sign of a strong, healthy, and resilient community. Providing opportunities along the full spectrum of volunteer engagement builds individual and collective capacity and helps to identify and grow community assets, the foundation for most community and neighbourhood development strategies (Torjman, 2007). Resilient communities have a shared history, are able to voice common concerns, and can create a collective vision for their future. They are also best able to respond to unforeseen circumstances, including health emergencies and natural disasters, work together more cohesively, and leverage their strengths.

Place-making is another dimension of community resiliency. According to an American study, cities in which people exhibited a high level of attachment to their place not only had stronger economic growth but their residents were also happier and more productive in their work and contributed more to their communities (Loflin, 2012). Several years ago, The Calgary Foundation undertook a Sense of Community project and found that there were connections between and among the sense of community, safety, health, and social development. Volunteering and citizen engagement are variables that are used to measure the level of attachment and the sense of community in both of these initiatives. We are not talking simply about a correlation between high volunteer rates and stronger communities; we are talking about expanding the base within a broader spectrum of engagement.

LEVERAGING CURRENT TRENDS IN VOLUNTEERING

Broadening the focus of volunteering from concepts of service and benevolence to those of active citizenship and community engagement serves to open up dialogue pertaining to the spectrum of engagement that can be fostered in Canada. By identifying pan-Canadian trends in volunteering, it becomes possible to design meaningful opportunities based on the needs and wants of Canada's volunteers. Regardless of age, studies have shown that volunteers today lead more structured lives; are more mobile, tech-savvy, results-oriented, autonomous; and have multiple roles and interests (Maranta & Spevak Sladowski, 2010). This calls upon organizations to be more structured and more flexible at the same time, and to be well prepared for volunteers and provide the space for volunteers to bring what they have to offer.

The identification of these trends in volunteering are not new, but what has become evi-

dent are the gaps between what Canadians are looking for in volunteering and how organizations are engaging volunteers. The following gaps were identified in a pan-Canadian study in 2010 (Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development, 2010):

Many people are looking for group activities, but few organizations have the capacity to offer them.

- Many people come with professional skills, but many professionals are looking for volunteer tasks that involve something different from their work life.
- Organizations are expected to clearly define the roles and boundaries of volunteers, but many volunteers want the flexibility to initiate what they have to offer (i.e., create their own volunteer opportunity).
- Many organizations still want long-term commitment, but many more volunteers are looking for shorter-term opportunities.
- Many organizations focus on what they need, but, besides helping others, many volunteers come with their own goals to be met.

Of these, the most prominent gaps are that volunteers come with their own goals, and they are looking for shorter-term opportunities. These characteristics may speak to the retired baby boomer who is looking for a volunteer task that is different from their professional experience, or they may speak to newcomer youth who is seeking to develop their resume by highlighting volunteer experiences related to their educational background.

The gaps identified in the research can be tremendously powerful when leveraged to support active citizenship. Organizations can benefit from identifying the ways that citizens want to be actively engaged. As volunteers have highlighted, many organizations still have traditional concepts of volunteering that sometimes limit their own civic participation. It is clear that increasingly autonomous, results-oriented volunteers have ideas about how they would like to build their own resilient communities.

STEWARDS FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017 will be an opportunity to highlight the stewardship of governments, businesses, and voluntary organizations in creating a more welcoming, diverse, and inclusive Canada. It will be an important time to demonstrate the full value and impact of volunteering as a vehicle for social development, health promotion, and community development. The spectrum of volunteer engagement in Canada is wide, not only in terms of the ways volunteers are engaging (being informed, supportive, active participants and/or leaders) but also in the avenues available to support volunteer engagement (e.g., volunteer centres, online databases, virtual volunteering, social media).

In the meantime, provinces, territories, employers, and organizations have an opportunity to respond to Canada's changing demographics with intentional strategies and informed practices to effectively engage baby-boomers, new Canadians, and Aboriginal and First Nations communities. The relevance of volunteering has not diminished, despite criticisms around its out-dated or elitist connotation. With the transitions in the voluntary sector as a backdrop, volunteering is being redefined in our everyday lives and in the ways that we participate and shape the communities we want for ourselves and for future generations. For more information visit www.volunteer.ca.

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