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Editors

Perspectives on Volunteering

Voices from the South

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Preface

Research and experience tell us that volunteer activity is key to the creation and sustainability of modern societies. The importance of volunteering has become paramount for the creation and sustenance of democracy and the maintenance of social cohesion, as well as for securing and enhancing opportunities of engagement for development. Formal volunteering manifests itself through the individuals that participate in diverse types of associations and organisations throughout the world. Informal volunteering has grown from the roots of tradition and expressions of solidarity that are present, in different dimensions, in all societies. Furthermore, individuals' voluntary gifts of time and effort to a cause in isolated forms can also be counted as solidarity and volunteer work.

While the issue of volunteering attracts scholarly attention, the theoretical and empirical bias of much scholarship involves a Northern or Western perspective and experience in developed countries. In cases where scholars explore volunteering in the Global South—a reference to developing countries and countries in transition—they often use an exogenous lens. For example, organisations such as UN Volunteers and Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO) publish reports on volunteering in the Global South, yet the focus is on international volunteers, a Western or Northern practice. Furthermore, Southern nations are included in global indexes on giving and volunteering such as the Gallup World Poll (GWP) and the World Values Survey (WVS) in order to generate comparative statistics, yet volunteering is framed and measured using a supposedly universal or global standard that actually holds a Northern bias. In other words, publications on volunteering through an exogenous lens are well represented while those from an endogenous lens focusing on the cultural and contextual realities of the South are less evident. As a result, the distinct expressions and “awareness” of volunteering from the lived reality of different regions of the world are prone to be overlooked and underrepresented in the literature. Since not that much previous attention had been given to a specific focus on this region in the past, the editors of this volume considered it time to gather more information of how volunteering plays out in this area of the world as well as how it manifests its expressions.

This volume encompasses experiences and research studies from the Global South, from which authors were invited to share their expertise and knowledge while focusing on a determined region. A focus on diverse and comparative experiences provided in this anthology generates the potential for definitional and conceptual developments in the field, refinements to “universal” indicators and measures and a wider body of descriptive cases. These descriptive cases help us go beyond the use of a Northern and Western gaze as the reference point, in which scholars risk overlooking and undervaluing the richness and texture of the volunteer phenomenon.

We start our academic journey with the observation that the motivations, formations and practices of volunteerism are universal but to varying degrees have refinements that are specific to a place and time. Culture and context—including social, economic, political and stage of development—are distinguishing factors that shape the face of volunteerism: motivations, forms and impact. Furthermore volunteerism plays out at different levels from the community to the national.

In this book, a group of prestigious international academics presents the results of their investigations on the subject of volunteering in the Global South. They approach volunteering through a series of essays and case studies that represent recent academic research, thinking and practice on volunteering. Some draw comparisons and conclusions about volunteer activity from surveys, in-depth interviews, participant observation and field work. Some come to important conclusions on development and the future of participation and volunteer activity based on large-scale surveys and longitudinal studies. Others demonstrate the role that governments, large organisations and culture play in volunteering and how all of these can influence participation in civic purposes.

Working from the premise that volunteering is “universal,” this collection draws on experiences from Latin America, Africa and Asia. The focus on developing countries and countries in transition documents a fresh set of experiences and perspectives on volunteering. These accounts complement the conventional focus in the literature on the “developed” world, which studies Northern or Western experiences from Europe and North America. While developing countries and countries in transition are in the spotlight for this volume, the developed country experience is not ignored. Rather it is used in this anthology as a critical reference point for comparisons, allowing points of convergence, disconnect and intersection to emerge.

We would like to take this opportunity to profusely thank all those involved in the production of this volume. The details for its elaboration were long and tedious, and all authors were gracious in their patience and generous in their comments. From those that prepared a contribution to all of those individuals that participated in its conception and nurtured its progress: local and international colleagues, editors, assistants, reviewers, commentators, advisors and students, we would like to extend a special recognition and thank you.

Dr. Butcher would like to thank Susan Wilkinson-Mapossa for her ideas and support at the beginning of this project and Santiago Sordo for his help in proofreading and copy editing.

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In all, it is our hope that the contributions in this volume will serve to advance the knowledge of volunteering and add to the study of this important and complex set of phenomena.

Mexico City, Mexico
Chicago, IL, USA

Jacqueline Butcher
Christopher J. Einolf

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