

Making the Impossible Possible: A Contribution of connection-centered volunteering to local social development action

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to explain the benefits of volunteering from the perspective of local social development. It is observed that volunteering activism contributes to transform social development into an action which is conventionally believed to be a goal of economic development. The authors' experience in community volunteering programmes demonstrates that modern volunteering is now, unlike its traditional charitable or philanthropic meaning, a community level connection-centred action which generates welfare benefits to the community. It is extensively used in the context of local level activities of Community-based Organisations. That volunteering activism contributes to transform social development into an action, especially at grassroots, and energizes involvement of the community as an active partner in local social development action.

Keywords: *Community Volunteering, Connection-centered, Development Action, Social Community-Based Organizations, Volunteering, Local*

Introduction

Social development is a complex process which encompasses all aspects of development, for example, economic, social, cultural, spiritual, and environmental, and is predominantly policy-driven in order for it to take place without a greater

emphasis on one aspect over another. The common belief, especially among neo-classical economists, is that economic growth accompanies social development. However, we believe that it can happen only if the policies are in place to redistribute the benefits of economic growth in a manner that ensures social justice. Again, if it is to be so, social development must be an action too, driven by “inclusive social policies”. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that social development cannot be expected to happen spontaneously through economic growth, but it has to be an action happening hand-in-hand with economic growth. The outcome of such an action would then be a social condition in which everyone has the opportunity to lead a relatively reasonable level of decent and quality living.

The idea that modern volunteering is a form of community action, which connects people together and promotes and generates community benefits has already been widely recognized and documented (Korten and Klauss, 1984; Korten, 1990; IAVE, 1990; Warburton and Oppenheimer 2000; United Nations, 2001; Omoto and Snyder, 2009; Leigh, 2011; UNV, 2020; Omoto, et.al 2012; Ahmadi, (2013); Eliasoph, 2013; Volunteering Australia, 2015; Gamlath, 2017 and 2018). When the community members are closely connected with each other, communities are strengthened and individual and community benefits increase (Healy & Hampshire, 2000), and people have better personal wellbeing outcomes (Wilkinson, 1999). This indicates that volunteering can energize, mobilize, and involve local communities as active partners in local level social development. Based on the authors’ experience with Community Based Organisations (CBOs) that extensively apply connection-centered volunteering approach and strategies in community work, the paper puts forth the view that volunteering creates conditions at grassroots for social development action to take place.

The discussion is undertaken as a “practice-based reflexive and reflective interpretation of information”, which is a widely applied technique in research-informed practice in professional social and community work (Payne, 2014;

Yegidis, Weinback and Myers, 2012; Hardwick and Worsle, 2011; Gray and Webb, 2009; Trevithick, 2005). The information, which is qualitatively presented and interpreted, is drawn from the authors' field practice experience with a range of CBOs of different scales that recruit volunteers extensively in their work. Some inferences are substantiated with the references to secondary sources. The key implication emerged in this discussion is that if volunteering can be applied in community work with principles of promoting community centrality, equality and social justice, collective identity and civil society and social capital, moving away from traditional task-centered and service delivery orientation, it can enable an active community participation in local level social development action.

Social development as an action

Midgley (1999:25) points out that social development is “a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development”. It is however a complex process which encompasses all aspects of development, for example, economic, social, cultural, spiritual and environmental, and is predominantly policy-driven in order for it to take place without a greater emphasis on one aspect over another.

Social development can be an action that is not impossible to be made possible even at the local level (Ife, 2012; Pawar, 2014; Cox, 1996 and 1997; Cox and Pawar, 2012; Pawar and Cox, 2010). Pawar (2014:14) says that achieving social development at all levels on a global scale is a challenging, but it is a practical one. It has been meticulously proven that the social development perspective is a practice model too, with a readily available set of tools that can be applied in local level community action (Cox, 1996 and 1997; Cox and Pawar, 2012; Pawar, 2014). Almost all of these writers say that it has never been an ideal, and evidence is available even in recent history indicating that it has been applied as an action in

order to gear up local level development by global organizations like the United Nations.

The idea that social development is an intervention committed to promoting the welfare of the population has also been articulated (Midgley, 1996; UNDP 1996). Midgley (1996) and Pawar (2014) convincingly emphasized that social welfare would not occur automatically as the result of natural processes. In its institutional definition of social welfare, United Nations (1967) highlights that social welfare has a function within the broad space of a country's social development, and in this sense, social welfare should play a major role in contributing to the effective mobilization and deployment of human and material resources of the country to deal successfully with the social requirements of change to enhance people's well-being. This indicates the recognition that social development is an action. It seeks to link the action of social development to economic development in a dynamic way as it has to happen within the broad context of development.

Modern volunteering

Reaching a universal agreement on the interpretation of the modern form of volunteering has not been an easy task. Leigh (2011) suggests that it is because the terms which define volunteering, and the form of its expression vary in different languages and cultures, though the expressive values and norms could be common and universal. One of the earliest attempts to universalize the core meaning of volunteering can be found in the work of United Nations (UNO, 2001). They point out that modern volunteering is an activity, which should not be undertaken primarily for financial reward, but be undertaken voluntarily, according to an individual's own free-will, and be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer, or to society at large. This interpretation elaborates several aspects of volunteer action and implies the fact that volunteers may not benefit from volunteering. However, it is now widely recognized that volunteering brings significant benefits to the volunteer as well. For example, Volunteering Australia, an organization which has

successfully incorporated community volunteering into the country's broad social and economic development, recognizes volunteering as an activity which takes place through not-for-profit organizations or projects and is undertaken with the volunteer's own free-will for the benefit of both community as well as the volunteer (Volunteering Australia, 2015).

The Universal Declaration of Volunteering (IAVE, 1990) too interprets volunteering as a two-way process of benefits – to both community and the volunteer. In much broader context, they elucidate modern volunteering as a creative and mediating action. It enables building healthy and sustainable communities that respect the dignity of all people, empower people to exercise their rights as human beings and thus to improve their lives, help solve social, cultural, economic, and environmental problems, and create a more humane and just society through worldwide cooperation. Furthermore, with an attempt to articulate universal nature and values of volunteering, UN Volunteers (UNV, 2020) perceived volunteering as a human activity, a basic expression of human relationships that occurs in every society in the world, recognizing volunteers themselves as being an integral part of the very communities that they are supposed to contribute. While almost all these interpretations of modern volunteering revolve more or less around an identical territory, broadly, all resonate that at the heart of volunteerism are the ideals of connection, solidarity and service and the belief that together the world can be made a much better place.

The common position of the above interpretations of modern volunteering, especially in relation to the key purpose of volunteering, seems to be somewhat different from the way it had been seen in the past (Leigh, 2011). For example, traditionally, it was seen as an act of charity, philanthropy or benevolence, and the volunteer workforce as being a part of the frontline workers helping organizations to achieve better outcomes of the task of service delivery. In that, the volunteer position was always described as a set of directed tasks so that, in many

circumstances, it was the volunteer and the task that was viewed central, not the community. Contrary to that understanding, the common stance of modern volunteerism is that it points towards community engagement with implications of reciprocity, connection, opportunities for establishment and expansion of networks, building of trust and participation (Principi, et al. 2014; Dekker and Halman, 2012; Omoto, et.al 2012; Etziony, 1993 and 1995; Huges et. al. 2006). Even in a very specific situation with very specific tasks where volunteering can take place, for example, a situation of crisis intervention in an incident of natural disaster, modern volunteering can lead to the community to strengthen connections and bonds (Omoto, et.al 2012). When the volunteers turn up for relief and recovery tasks in response to crisis, they not only help victims and repair physical damage, but also strengthen the psychological intact of the community. Specifically, when volunteers turn out to show their empathic concerns, they provide visible evidence of the worth of stronger bonds of connections. They help people realize the value of withdrawal from their investments in social capital in a situation of crisis. This positive impact seems especially likely when volunteers work to empower community members rather than simply providing for their needs (Omoto, et.al, 2012; Omoto and Snyder, 2009).

Connection-centered volunteering

The new approach to volunteering that would promote circumstances of engagement in the community action becomes the culture of the connection-centered community volunteering and another form of effective community engagement and social capital accumulation (WCC, 2007; Oppenheimer and Warburton, 2014; Oppenheimer, 2008; Hardill and Baines, 2020; Chanan and Miller, 2013; Rochester et.al, 2012; Gamlath, 2017 and 2018). It can also be a powerful strategy to bring healthy community back into usual strength in circumstances where community connections and strength seem to be gradually depleting in modern societies (Etziony, 1993 and 1995; Huges et al. 2006; Korten and Klauss, 1984; Korten,

1990; IAVE, 1990; Warburton and Oppenheimer 2000; United Nations, 2001; Omoto and Snyder, 2009; Leigh, 2011; UNV, 2020; Omoto, et al. 2012; Ahmadi, 2013; Eliasoph, 2013; Volunteering Australia, 2015). Omoto and Snyder (2009) explore who gets involved and why and elucidate how effective the role of volunteering is in community action by which means community connections are strengthened. Once the connections are built up and strengthened, further generation of a process of ongoing reciprocal reactions between volunteering and healthy and connected communities is also identified. For example, having positive impacts on the emotional wellbeing of community members set antecedents of promoting volunteerism which in turn enables experience the consequences of volunteerism reiterating the wellbeing benefits of strong connections (Omoto and Snyder: 2009). In a broader sense, even the United Nations mission statement of volunteering echoes this process of reciprocal positive reactions of the link between volunteering and community connections as the power of modern volunteering which can create a better world through its contribution to build healthy and connected communities (UNV, 2020).

In this way, all aspects and players of connection are inclusive and closely interconnected for interchangeable mobilization of input contribution and benefit consumption (WCC, 2007; Chanan and Miller, 2013; Rochester et.al, 2016) so that it becomes a people focused action. The key players of inclusive connection consist of volunteers and community groups and members. The reason why people get involved in volunteering is recognized and valued. They have an invitation to participate and contribute. Volunteers reach out to almost everyone so that even community members who might miss out can be informed. Building relationships is supported and strengths, skills, and life experiences of everyone are recognized. The community develops collective identity, shares a common purpose, and demonstrates ownership to what they engage in, what they do and produce. This process facilitates individual empowerment and capacity development, and the collective strength of empowered individuals motivates personal as well as collective progress.

Principles and activism

Community volunteering set the social structure for community members to engage with each other and be involved in local action of which the guiding principles are:

- 1) Centrality of people - keeping community members central so that they actively participate in the planning and implementation of the activities they are involved in.
- 2) Empowerment - recognizing everyone's equal rights, worth and power and encouraging everyone to exercise these rights as strengths to focus on their own wellbeing outcomes, and then mobilize it so that community becomes stronger through power of collective actions.
- 3) Identity of Cohesiveness - stimulating the attitudes of collective identity and a cohesive community while maintaining individual socio-cultural and religious uniqueness; and,
- 4) Association and social capital - motivating people to be involved in the processes of healthy association by building social capital and promoting values of collectivism.

Community volunteers share a common purpose and goal. This may occur in varying degrees. At one end, they work directly together and are trying to achieve outcomes. At the other end, they meet and make networks. They do not come with a preconceived idea of what outcome they would like to achieve. The communication flow could happen across volunteers and all other participants. All are interconnected. They listen to and facilitate community needs and wants. They facilitate community members to be involved in volunteer action and opportunities for the community to come together. They are flexible allowing the individuality of different volunteers to come through in their volunteer role and further link them to networks outside the community or amongst different communities.

The community is recognized as the expert on what it needs. Therefore, the reasons why people are involved in volunteering are valued. All aspects of need, for example, individual, family, group, and community, are recognized so that representatives of all those levels are invited and enabled to participate and contribute. Those community members who might perhaps not have realized that they could become involved are reached out and connected. Building relationships is supported and relationships that already exist are valued and recognized.

The following Figure (Figure 1) depicts how connection-centered volunteerism operates at grassroots levels. It is built upon three key pillars which involve approach, principles and key players or stakeholders.

The key players involved include are volunteers, community, and external resources especially the facilitators of the entire process representing institutional structures at the community level, mostly community-based organizations which recruit volunteers and apply more sophisticated volunteering strategies in their community actions.

However, all pillars clearly reflect the value of being community-centered so that the community itself inherently becomes the central element. Strategies are also a reflection of extensions of the key principles but, at the same time, are what the volunteering activism aims to achieve so that they can be recognized as outcomes as well. In this way, strategies and outcomes set the local condition for furthering active and strong community involvement in local level social development action.

Approach and principles

The vision of connection-centered volunteering is clearly underlined by the belief that empowered people become central element of affairs, processes and tasks that affect their own life progress. It assumes that, to reach out grassroots and facilitate

people to believe in and build on their own potentials and resources, people focused structures and actions need to be facilitated.



Figure 1: Process of Local Social Development Action

The following simple story of an experience of a development facilitator in a remote village in South Africa is a classic example to demonstrate how people become confident of their capabilities and feel powerful once their involvement is placed central rather than placing the solution central.

“A development worker went to a remote village. He was highly motivated and fully prepared to solve all the villagers’ problems and transform the ‘primitive’ community. He saw the people as living in fear and apathy, not prepared to do anything to change their situation. The community told him about a ‘monster’ across the valley which they believed was sent by the evil spirits to kill them. They

went to show the development worker where the ‘monster’ was. They left him to face the beast alone. After crossing the valley, he discovered that the ‘monster’ was nothing but an overgrown watermelon. Nevertheless, to satisfy the villagers, he acted ‘brave’ by drawing out his sword and dramatically cutting the watermelon into pieces as the villagers watched from a ‘safe distance’. To his great dismay, the villagers would not welcome him back despite what he had done for them! They requested him to leave the village in peace, fearing that he was yet another monster. They wondered how he could overcome the ‘monster’ all alone if he was not one himself. Later there was again another watermelon. Another development worker came to the village, learning of their fear he asked them to join in with their traditional weapons and ‘face’ the ‘monster’. On reaching the place they all set on the ‘monster’ with their traditional weapons until they had shattered it to pieces. They proudly walked back to the village, singing and dancing, celebrating their great achievement” (Schenck & Louw: 1995: 83-84)

In order to make changes or transformations, a truly people focused approach has to be an asset-based one, in which people become central element as an asset (Kenny: 2006). Unlike in deficit-based approaches, it acknowledges that communities are never a blank-sheet. Any given community always possesses wealth of skills, knowledge, experience and material resources and wisdom (Chambers: 1983; Korten: 1989 & 1996; Burkey: 1993). A people focused approach enables identifying those resources, make them central and work with the community to create opportunities to expand, improve and use them for their own individual and collective progress¹. The centrality of connection-centered volunteering strategy is the acknowledgement that people possess enormous resources and wisdom, they are capable, they have capacities, and if opportunities are created and given through a carefully designed non-intrusive, non-disempowering, and facilitative process, they will use it and become the nucleus of their own progress. It is the condition of

¹ *“Ordinary people can do extraordinary things if they are given the opportunity”, Barak Obama, CNN, 2007*

conduciveness where active social development action initiates, takes momentum and thrives.

The connection-centered volunteering approach instigates reaching out to people believing, that they are capable people, are not simply “objects” on behalf of whom decisions are taken. “We don’t develop people, people develop themselves²” (quoted from Schenck and Louw: 1995). People have confidence and potential to exert their power in planning and decision-making processes at community and society levels that affect their lives (Payne: 2005; Kenny: 2006; Ife, 2006).

According to Payne (2005) true empowerment needs to be a process that enables ordinary people to gain power of decisions and actions over their own lives and increase capacity and self-confidence to show that they can influence social and personal blocks that exercise existing power negatively over them. Kenny (2006) indicates that people are not objects, in an empowerment approach, they cannot be merely recognized to be studied, rescued, corrected, or controlled. If they are treated in that manner, it does not accept that people are “a package of capabilities”. If their capabilities and resources are recognized and helped to be used, they will be capable of realizing their own potentials, increasing self-confidence and, transferring it to other individuals, groups, and communities to exert a positive community transformation that is required (Kenny, 2006; Ife, 2006). Action of local social development recognizes that the power of human beings and their subjective development as being equally important as their material development (Ife, 2006). This fundamental appreciation of connection-centered volunteering approach ensures the strong adherence in the process of outreaching and engaging every

² *An inspiring statement by Julius Nyerere, renowned thinker, political theorist and writer on “African (Ujamaa) Socialism” and former President of Tanzania*

single person in the community, especially the disadvantaged people, to the key precondition that people are not conceptualized as objects of development.

Connection-centered volunteerism stimulates the collective identity of a cohesive community while maintaining the identity of individual socio-cultural uniqueness. It enhances the self-image of an identity of cohesiveness and bridges everyone to a community collectivism to which all individuals and groups feel a sense of belonging and representation irrespective of all forms of differences and diversity. Again, it motivates people to be involved in the processes of healthy and harmonious association building within which individual uniqueness and representation is again recognized, appreciated, and respected.

Energizing such a community with an identity of cohesiveness preserves some important aspects of social development such as the cultural and spiritual aspects even at the grassroots. As a whole, it is therefore to “re-humanize” people who have been continuously and systematically “de-humanized” by extremely negative consequences of some prolonged conservative approaches to development in which ordinary people become objects. There is a plethora of writings which indicates that in conservative development enterprise, people have been perceived as passive, identity-less recipients to whom development can and has to be brought. Therefore, social development action, even at the grassroots, promotes collective dimension of identity and feeling of belonging as an element of paramount important and rejects the dehumanizing enterprise of development driven social change. This fundamental requirement for local level social development action, the focus on human relations inherent in the approaches and strategies of connection-centered volunteerism is instrumental in building communities of collective dimension.

Strategies

When the people engage in collective community action, and become connected together through volunteering, strategies are created for social development to take

place through that community activism. For example, some key areas of these strategies can be identified as:

- 1) Information - provision of information empowers local communities to make decisions about how to be involved in their community and ensures people's access to appropriate services and resources. Volunteering and community participation opportunities will be promoted broadly, so the community is informed of the ways that they can get involved.
- 2) Connection - connection with integrity of CBOs, there is openness and honesty about the scope and the purpose of volunteering so that there is a willingness to trust the community views, experiences, and aspirations.
- 3) Inclusion - a diverse range of people in the community have a chance to be involved in the volunteering. Community volunteering process seeks to include and support those who may otherwise not be involved.
- 4) Cohesiveness - people have the opportunity to meet other people, get involved and form relationships. This fosters relationships between and within communities based on mutual understanding, trust, and respect.
- 5) Influence - when people participate in the community, it makes a difference in the way things are done. Then the policies and services or the ways the organizations work in the community reflect the input and involvement of local people.
- 6) Accessibility - people who have difficulty to get involved are helped to overcome the barriers to access and become involved.
- 7) Local - the opportunities to get involved in the community are available locally, and the resources available for community volunteering prioritize meeting the community participation needs, aspirations and interests of the local community.
- 8) Sustainable - opportunities to get involved and the activities that meet current needs have positive influence on the community's ability to meet future needs.
- 9) Diversity - different individuals and groups work together and become members of a group characterized by complex diversity. They are strongly bound together

with shared identity and interests but, nevertheless, are empowered enough not to lose individual uniqueness of being a member of a particular social or cultural group. Tolerating and respecting the presence of all forms of diversity in the community thus become a norm which is promoted across the community.

10) Empowerment - collective actions in the community resulted in cohesive groups and communities of empowered individuals who are able to take control of self-development, participate in local decision-making processes and promote civil society.

The entire process of change taking place at the grassroots with the new connection-centered approach and strategies of volunteering activism enables a unique expression; an expression of binding sentiment of unquestioned virtues of human relationships, with which people remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors. Such communities are a clear manifestation of the recognition of the centrality of people in their own progress. However, it is accepted outright that, for people to become so, they need to be motivated by example and facilitated with resources. It is a people focused ideological positioning with which volunteering transforms community members to do things simply differently from the ways they were used to be doing. As Ife (2006) writes, it gives even disadvantaged people the opportunity to come out of their disadvantaged situations, identify their capacities and lead their own progress individually with the help of collective action. It is the message that the volunteer's connection-centered approach bring to the local communities. The message is accepted without suspicion because the volunteers are not unknown or outsiders to the local community. Volunteers are part of the local community itself and hence their new way of engaging local members quickly become a trustworthy to the locals. Therefore, the feeling of ownership to what the community is involved in doing with the close connection of the volunteers and local level institutional resource facilitation is highly likely to be firmly entrenched among everyone in the community. It creates conducive grassroots conditions for local social development action.

Conclusion

Our main objective of this descriptive paper was to elaborate on the view that the benefits of connection-centered approach and strategies to volunteering contribute to set social conditions at the grassroots for social development action to take place effectively. Social development is a complex process which encompasses all aspects of development, for example, economic, social, cultural, spiritual, and environmental, and is predominantly believed to be policy-driven in order for it to take place without a greater emphasis on one over another. The Common belief especially among neo-classical economists is that economic growth accompanies social development. However, our view is that it can happen only if the policies are in place to redistribute the benefits of economic growth in a manner that ensures social justice. Again, if it is to be so, social development must be an action too, driven by “inclusive social policies”. Therefore, it is believed that social development cannot be expected to happen spontaneously through economic growth, and it has to be an action happening hand-in-hand with economic growth. The outcome of such an action would then be a social condition where everyone has the opportunity to live a relatively reasonable level of decent and quality living. Unlike in the conventional form, modern volunteering action is not only simply geared by the feelings and attitudes of charity and philanthropy, but it is redefined as being driven by subjective satisfaction gained from connection and engagement focused, committed action of contribution to community uplifting. It is now said to be a human relationship-based action so that it is very much connection-centered in terms of approach and strategies. When formal institutional structures at the community level, particularly Community-Based Organizations, which extensively recruit community volunteers in their work, apply connection-centered volunteering approach and strategies, we observed that it creates conducive conditions for social development action to take place at the grassroots.

In conventional interpretations, social development is seen as a goal of economic development. We have taken the view, as has been already well articulated by many writers, at any level of society it happens, social development can be viewed as an action too. It enabled us to observe that modern community volunteering, if applied with connection-centered approach and strategies, energizes, mobilizes, and involves local communities as active partners in local level social development action generating important welfare and wellbeing benefits to the community per se. This is a process happening at the grassroots through volunteering which can mainly be observed in the context of local level activities of Community-based Organizations. Therefore, we conclude that modern volunteering is now a community level connection-centered action which promotes effective community engagement. It is extensively used in the context of local level activities of Community-based Organizations. A significant outcome of this volunteering activism is that it contributes to transform local social development into an action creating conducive local conditions for it to take place. It energizes involvement of community as an active partner in local social development action and generate important welfare and wellbeing benefits for the community itself.

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