

Museums as Agents in the New Age of Volunteering

What do we know?

The drive for volunteering has many roots in and impacts on societal development. It has been acknowledged as a variety of outcomes from volunteering. When the European Union by decision in 2009 made 2011 the European Year of Volunteering the objectives were set high:

- “1. To create an enabling and facilitating environment for volunteering in the EU;
2. To empower volunteer organisations and improve the quality of volunteering;
3. To reward and recognise volunteering activities; and
4. To raise awareness of the value and importance of volunteering.”

(EU Citizenship Portal)

There are important signals in these aims which become clearer when taking into account the definition of volunteering as “to offer to do something that you do not have to do, often without having been asked to do it and/or without expecting payment” (Cambridge Dictionary). EU wanted volunteering to grow in size and quality. There are many reasons for this. From a critical point of view the aim of growth in numbers can be explained by the need for work to be done is higher than the labour markets resources. The qualitative development aim may at least partly be explained by the need for volunteering in areas where specific competences are required.

Volunteering is nothing new, but the scientific interest is relatively new and growing fast. It is difficult to find firm statistics about volunteering. That has to do with several things. First, the interest in having any kind of overview of volunteering has been low, which is caused by traditionally little understanding of what to use such statistics for. Secondly, choosing to be a volunteer is considered a private individual matter in social-liberal societies. Thirdly, volunteering has in many cases broadly been considered as counterproductive to labour movement interests and therefore not respected as social capital providing for the people who engage in volunteering. It is therefore symptomatic, that besides a now growing national interest in collecting statistics in many countries in recent years, there are primarily two larger traditions of creating overviews of volunteering. One characteristic is the statistics based on surveys collected by the International Labour Organization who have been working on this since the beginning of this century – in parts in collaboration with United Nations. The other characteristic is what we may call the Anglo-Saxon tradition especially vivid in United Kingdom, United States and Australia, but even in Canada. There may be more people engaging in volunteering in these countries, but mainly volunteering seems to have survived from older days as it has been integrated in daily life and has been accepted. Maybe volunteering in the Anglo-Saxon countries has been allowed to co-exist with the labour market as a precondition for developing a welfare society, and maybe that has to do with the 20th century dominating public social- and health policies in these countries based

on insurance more than taxes whereas continental Europe and more so the Nordic countries have had the opposite development (Hobsbawm 1977 & Piketty 2020).

It has been possible in recent decades for governments and different interest organizations to professionalise surveys, statistics, volunteering management and developing quality measures and recommendations for volunteering. Much of the recent research divides the volunteering into three basic types – formal, non-formal and informal volunteering:

“a. Formal volunteering programs are structured and supervised. These are long term programs that also involve sustained, regular attendance from the volunteers. These programs usually have managers or coordinators that recruit, train, supervise and check volunteers’ work outcomes.

b. Non-formal volunteer work is usually done in local communities in unfunded and unstructured or semi-structured settings. Those who join non-formal programs often think of themselves as members or friends rather than volunteers

c. Informal volunteer work, on the other hand, are voluntary acts of helping and kindness like buying a neighbour’s groceries or babysitting for a friend.” (Live & Learn)

In many museums we may experience all these three forms of volunteering. At a first glance the formal volunteering with supervision and support from staff is probably the formal form which is most common among museums, but even museum friends’ associations as non-formal volunteering contributes to the activity level in the museums and is customary. The informal volunteering is trickier as the museums normally does not know much about it officially as it is not recorded, but all museums has probably experienced visitors and users supporting each other. So, all volunteering forms co-exists in the museums, but the formal volunteering is dominating. The available international statistics indicates some trends, even though we need to be cautious because of the general quality and the considerable national differences. In general, it is also important to bear in mind that since volunteering does not involve significant monetary transactions, it is seldom tracked in any administrative records (Salamon, Solokowski and Haddock, 2018). The following trends are visible in the material from the International Labour Organization – primarily collected 2014-2016 – and the survey from 2011 made by Eurostat for the European Parliament:

- In North America it appears as app. 25-30 percent of the adults participating in volunteering work activities in United States and app. 30-40 percent in Canada.
- In Northern Europe and Western Europe, have a high percentage of about 30 percent volunteering among adults with even higher percentage in the Netherlands.
- In Eastern Europe, the volunteering seems to be relatively lower than in the West, and in most countries between 5 and 15 percent, but with some exceptions, primarily in the Baltic countries where the amount of volunteering is close to the higher Scandinavian level.
- In Southern Europe, the level of volunteering seldom is higher than 10 percent among adults.

- In Europe as a whole the amount of volunteering is app. 25 percent of the adult population, of which half are volunteering on a regular basis and the other half more occasionally.
- In Europe as a whole the primary activities for volunteers are in sport and culture. (ILOSTAT & EUROSTAT)

We have almost no data from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and even for Europe and North America the data may not altogether be comparable. That has to do with how the national surveys are defining volunteering. Most countries ask if persons have been active in volunteering for a specific amount of time during the past 12 months, but the amount differs from a few hours up to several days or even weeks. The age groups included in the surveys also differs from country to country. Another aspect which influences the quality of the statistics is the perception of the interviewees of what the answers to the questions may be used for. Some people may be suspicious and not wanting to answer completely honest, or maybe be precautious on how much volunteering they do when they are told the survey is done by a labour organization, or the interviewees may exaggerate if they perceive that it is considered valuable as social capital in their country if they do volunteer work.

As the international and European data for volunteering does not go back in time, it is not possible to say anything certain about increase or decrease in volunteering or changes in the composition of volunteering. The International Labour Organization has however observed a high increase in volunteering in the first quarter of 2020 where many people volunteered to help in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. That rise has been analysed more closely in a Danish study which detected how the vast majority of the growth in volunteering was initiated, organized, and distributed through existing social networks, and, therefore not easily available to those with few or no social connections (Carlsen, Toubøl & Brincker, 2021). After a short extreme rise, the volunteering has decreased from an average of app. 20-25 percent to an average in the second quarter of 2020 on app. 10-15 percent internationally according to ILO (ILOSTAT). The increase is easy to understand: Many people wanted to help when the pandemic hit. Formal volunteering through support to health care and hospitals as well as help to individuals at home with shopping, etcetera. It is equally easy to understand the decrease in volunteering in general from the second quarter 2020 as the pandemic grew in seriousness with high numbers of infections and deaths, and people were acquired to stay home. The decrease has probably hit museums as well as other cultural activities as hard as sport. It has been difficult and tending to impossible to volunteer in museums physically during the pandemic as people were not only acquired to stay at home, but the museums were mostly closed.

What more do we know?

A major part of the research on volunteering – probably even the largest part – has focus on the impact of volunteering. The research is either interested in what participating in

volunteer activities means for the individual, or the research is looking on aspects of impacts of volunteering on different parts of society.

The overall conclusion is simple: Volunteering is good!

As mentioned before United Kingdom is a front runner in many aspects of volunteering for historical reasons. That is also vivid in the actions by the government who runs official authorized website information about volunteering (United Kingdom Government, 2021). On the opening page you read, that volunteering “*can be very rewarding and is a great way to meet new people, gain new or use existing skills, get experience, and to make a big difference to your community*”.

Research which uses data collected in the United Kingdom suggests “*that participation in volunteering increases with age and may decline at old age. As levels of various factors across different ages are not the same, they interact differently at various stages of the life. Therefore, the relationship between mental well-being and volunteering may be more or less evident at different time points across the life course....., and “When not considering age, those who engaged in volunteering regularly appeared to experience higher levels of mental well-being than those who never volunteered. To explore the association of volunteering with the GHQ (General Health Questionnaire) across the life course, interaction terms were fitted between age and volunteering. The interactions were significant, demonstrating that these associations vary by age. The association between volunteering and well-being did not emerge during early adulthood to mid-adulthood, instead becoming apparent above the age of 40 years and continuing up to old age. Moreover, in early adulthood, the absence of engagement in voluntary activity was not related to mental well-being, but GHQ scores for this group increased sharply with age, levelling off after the age of 40 and then increasing again above the age of 70 years. The study also indicates variation in GHQ scores (65%) within individuals across time, suggesting evidence of life-course effects. We conclude that volunteering may be more meaningful for mental well-being at some points of time in the life course.”* (Tabassum, Mohan and Smith, 2016).

The participation in volunteering is growing with age until a time when it in old age declines – which is probably health depended. An experienced healthy influence is from mid-life until the experienced decline. Women and men experience volunteering slightly different. Another recent study based on data from United Kingdom explains it like this: “*Using panel-data estimates that account for both unobserved heterogeneity as identified as important in the existent longitudinal literature, but also the endogeneity between volunteering and other leisure, which is strongly suggested by existing theoretical accounts of volunteering because of their likely simultaneous determination, the results show that males have more autonomy over their voluntary activity as part of their leisure time than females. It follows that initiatives that seek to raise volunteering need to recognize that females face additional constraints, as leisure time and volunteering are related..... For males, however, it seems that greater autonomy of volunteering might be more closely linked with the concept of serious leisure in the sense that there is a greater degree of choice in volunteering relative to leisure. In this case, status and career opportunity might be relevant recruitment levers for male volunteering. These results resonate with findings from volunteering at major sports events in which it has been shown that females seek to meet and make friends and socialize, whereas males seek extensions of their careers and labour market*

activity.....Being employed, for example, consistently reduces the frequency of volunteering, across all the models, which could be linked to the availability of time. However, having a higher income is shown to have a negative effect on female volunteering only. This is suggestive of a trade-off between the use of leisure time and that allocated to earn money.” (Downward, Hallmann and Rasciute, 2020)

The differences in choices of activities between men and women may have to do with differences in what generally drives men and women to volunteer. Even taken differences of this kind into account, there is little doubt that volunteering is healthy in a broad sense. Other sociodemographic and health circumstances can reduce the magnitude of the effects of volunteering on well-being, the effect of volunteering remained significant in almost all analyses. They also show that the best outcomes come with participating in higher numbers of activities, regardless of whether or not these were classed as formal or informal. (Matthews and Nazroo, 2020). Other research underlines the significance of volunteering as a social process - doing things together with others (Hansen and Christidou, 2015, Fristrup and Zipsane, 2018).

Not only is volunteering good for the individual. United Nations concluded the following about the social impact in their global report on volunteerism:

- Local volunteerism is a fundamental resilience strategy and a property of resilient communities.
- Local volunteerism enables collective strategies for managing risk.
- Volunteerism most valued by communities are the ability to self-organize and to form connections with others.
- These distinctive characteristics of local volunteerism can both boost and diminish community resilience under different conditions.
- Volunteerism is particularly significant for vulnerable and marginalized groups.
- The costs and benefits of volunteerism are not always distributed equitably.
- The manner in which external actors engage with local volunteerism matters.
- Effective collaboration with volunteers can transform volunteering from a coping mechanism to a strategic resource for community resilience.
- An enabling environment for volunteerism strengthens community resilience.

(United Nations, 2018)

The image and the reality

There is a great deal of positive atmosphere in the research and reports on volunteerism. It is good for everybody and everything it seems.

Under the surface of “goodness” for individuals and society which has developed during recent decades we may find other stories. One such story is the weakening of the labour movement and public government influence since the 1980’ies which has made volunteering both morally and politically possible, and socially and financially necessary. Long term

trends in economic, demographic and labour organization are globally and also in Europe pointing in that direction (Piketty, 2014 & 2020).

These developments – probably supported by many others – has challenged the perception of what volunteering is. The image of older well educated white woman fulfilling her aspirations from younger days in the museum or the older man who uses his amateur or professional skills and interests in motors at the transport museum still persists. But they are far from alone today. The volunteers are there in all ages and the sharp line between what is volunteering and what is work is dwindling. That has to do with the shift in labour life from a focus on formal qualifications towards a focus on broader competences – a shift which has been underway since the 1970ies and still goes on (Ehlers, 2019). The formal qualifications from formal and non-formal education are still there and measured and presented in certificates, but for the individual to contribute to a creative and dynamic work life which changes all the time a broader set of competencies are required.

An illustrative example is given in this recent guide to what typical skills should be included in what the guide call “a core competency section” for a cv:

- **Leadership:** Shows your ability to assemble and lead a team
- **Flexibility:** Shows that you're willing and able to adapt to any situation
- **Communication:** Demonstrates your ability to work with clients, co-workers, and managers
- **Time management:** Shows your skills in developing timelines and completing projects
- **Problem-solving:** Demonstrates how you evaluate situations and find effective solutions
- **Teamwork:** Indicates you work well with others and thrive in a team environment
- **Responsibility:** Demonstrates that you can be counted on to complete tasks are assigned to you
- **Adaptability:** Shows that you can adjust to new situations and continue working at a high level
- **Motivation:** Involves your ability to keep yourself motivated, along with those around you
- **Focus:** Shows your level of attention to tasks
- **Integrity:** Indicates that you only submit finished work that meets your own high standards
- **Commitment to excellence:** Illustrates that you are someone who strives to do their best
- **Career-focused:** Verifies that you are focused on moving forward in your career path
- **Ambitious:** Shows your work is the best it can be, and you're not afraid to take risks
- **Avid learner:** Shows your commitment to improving yourself
- **Results-driven:** Signifies that when you work on a project, you always look to provide the best results
- **Collaborative learner:** Confirms that you enjoy working with others to learn on the job

While the above competencies are interpersonal skills, it's important to also include your skillset that is industry-specific within your core competencies section.” (Indeed Career Guide, 2021)

For many the above statements does not make you think that is learned in school. The competences mentioned here are not acquired in formal education through courses. They are primarily acquired through practice, and much of that practice may be from work or volunteering alike. This means that volunteering today increasingly makes up a part of the

lifelong learning process for many people. This transition disturbs the traditional division of faculties in labour life and between labour life and volunteering, and even learning and education (Zipsane, 2011).

Volunteering is increasingly being integrated as a hybrid between labour, education and leisure and drivers behind this development are manifold. The needs of society are already mentioned above as waged labour and public financing cannot meet the demand alone. It could be added that this is recognised globally (Volkov and Ovsii, 2021).

The individual perspective varies too, but at least two drivers seem to have increased in volunteering in museums which has not often been recognized as such. They can be characterized as volunteering for entering labour life and volunteering for re-entering labour life.

Internship as voluntary training exercise has a long tradition as an entrance to employment in museums. Many museum professionals have started their museum career by internship at a museum. Often such internship was combined with formal studies. In universities with courses and programmes in museum studies and museum education it is common to have collaborations with one or more museums about internships for the students. Talking with museum colleagues in United Kingdom, Germany and Turkey confirms that there is a strong tendency towards a growing number of internships in museums (Interviews). The employers – museums or other businesses – are expected by the interns to have an eye for potential selecting future employees among the interns (Adjum, 2020). There is evidence which indicate that internships improve students' employability, academic outcomes, and career crystallization, but the evidence is no clear on the effects of internships on employability over the long-term (Hora, Wolfram and Thomson, 2017).

Museums have also for a long time been popular workplaces for programmes designed for strengthening labour market re-entering competences. The participants may have many different backgrounds, but they share unemployment as a feature. In some programs they may be paid, or they can secure to keep their welfare payment if they participate in the programmes. But the participants in the employment trainee programmes have mostly been offered to work for a fixed period of time in a museum. The voluntary element in this kind of arrangement is of course questionable as the participants may receive an income which may be related to their placement, and the activities may not be the first choice. The participants are however participating in activities and provides value for the museum but are not regular employees. The political strategy behind this has developed significantly during the decades. In some countries much of the growth in museums during the 1970ies and up to the 2000 was supported by governments and local authorities through offering museums as job-training places for people who for a variety of reasons was unable to find work. This was for many museums a strong support for their growth and in some museums the opportunities in these arrangements were highly valued and efforts were made to change the perspective on the trainee from that of "client" to that of "learner" (Zipsane, 2007). In recent decades, this development of political strategy has continued, and we see examples of shaping a narrative around the phenomenon in terms of "smart, inclusive growth" (Tuck and Dickinson, 2015).

There is still a lack of one component for reaching a more complete integration of a lifelong learning drive through volunteering in the labour market. Beside the volunteering for entering and re-entering the labour market volunteering is still not very visible when at work, but it is coming and there are signs of that. During recent decades, a number of highly profiled companies have included advice to employees for volunteering work. The advice is clearly given as signals to strengthen the company brands as well as the employees' competences, as much as for contributing to community development (Derecskei and Nagy, 2020). The reasoning behind the drive for volunteering as part of work life may vary, but from being a phenomenon it is now spreading and arguments against are fading away.

For museums this creates a challenge as many professional staff are "always" working. Their passion is as much their hobby as it is their job. That is however also why museums through volunteering can offer so much more than other sectors. Museums can open doors and create access and participation outside their normal opening hours or within opening hours for specific target groups, etcetera. Whenever museum staff are engaged in such activities and doing it outside their official working hours and without any extra pay, it is volunteering. For the museum as a business it is like a pro bono and as brand strengthening as if any other business would do so, and for the individual museum staff it is a training and development exercise.

The new forms of volunteering are institutionalized as individualized 'plug-in' activities that mimic classic voluntary participation but can also be institutionally enforced. It leaves no doubt that the institutionally individualized restructuring of volunteering fundamentally changes the forms and meanings of volunteering (Hustinx, 2008). Museums are slowly but surely adapting to the new realities. The co-existence of traditional volunteering – formal, non-formal and informal – and volunteering which is shaped by efforts for entering and re-entering labour life creates great opportunities. The potential for the museum to contribute to social justice and strengthen the brand is enormous when also combined with pro bono open-door and out-reach volunteering.

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