

Volunteering and Community Connection: Benefits of Community Volunteering to Connect People Together Through School Children and Build a Harmonious Community

Shanti Nandana Wijesinghe*

Abstract

Unlike traditional forms of volunteering, modern volunteering has new purposes and outcomes. It is now recognized as a legitimate way for individuals to formally participate in local affairs through community-level action. In many countries, volunteers have a nationally legislated institutional structure and set of principles, rights, and responsibilities, which is collectively agreed upon to be adhered to and safeguarded by all volunteers and the organizations and programs they are involved in. These arrangements have made volunteer action somewhat professional. The stories of thousands of volunteers, all around the world, demonstrate that modern volunteering generates benefits to both individuals as well as the community as a whole. It connects individuals to their communities and helps promote the attitude of connection, belonging, and shared identity, and rebuilding “community,” which is claimed to be at risk of fragmentation. This assertion was examined with a community-level social development project in Northern Sri Lanka planned and conducted entirely by a group of young community volunteers, and the conclusion that community volunteering can be successfully applied as a strategy to connect people and promote attitudes of harmony within socially and culturally diverse community contexts is presented here in this paper.

Keywords: Community connection, school children in Sri Lanka, sustainable peace, volunteerism, youth empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Volunteering exists in many different societies in many different forms, though a common characteristic is its individual benefit, especially subjective satisfaction through “charitable contribution,” helping those who are in need of help, individually or through collectives of individuals or institutions, without any expectations of material remuneration. Its charitable meaning still exists; however, the stories of thousands of volunteers worldwide transcend a new message that modern volunteering, as a community-level action, generates enormous social benefits to both individuals and the community as a whole [1].

*Author for Correspondence

Malefane Justice Matele

E-mail: shantinandanawijesinghe@gmail.com

Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

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Modern volunteering is now formalized and professionalized as a “community-level action” and “legitimate way for individuals to formally participate” in local affairs. In many countries, volunteers have a national-level institutional structure, constituted in many instances, and a set of rights and responsibilities, which is collectively agreed upon by all volunteers and the organizations they are involved in to be adhered to and safeguarded. This has made volunteer action somewhat professional [2].

Modern volunteering empowers individuals to participate in civil society and enables them to influence key social, economic, cultural, and even political affairs and processes that affect them in the community in various ways. Moreover, it makes people feel that they are connected and belong to a cohesive community with a shared identity. This is especially evident in diverse, multicultural community contexts, where trends have been evident for some time now that connections between diverse individuals and groups are falling apart [3]. Modern volunteering helps bring people together and build healthy and harmonious communities [4].

This paper examines this assertion through the writer's own experience as a social worker in several community programs with community volunteers in one of the most multicultural cities, Whittlesea, in one of the most multicultural countries, Australia [5]. The writer then goes on to promote the opinion that modern volunteering can be successfully applied as a strategy to build a harmonious community within diversity. In this regard, the writer again discusses his experience as a volunteer in a community-level social development project in Northern Sri Lanka [6–15].

What is Modern Volunteering?

Third, there is no universally based definition of volunteering. The United Nations (2001) [16] used a long and detailed definition in the International Year of Volunteers in 2001. It emphasizes three key characteristics of volunteering: the activity should not be undertaken primarily for financial reward, although the reimbursement of the out-of-pocket expenses of the volunteer is allowed; the activity should be undertaken voluntarily, according to an individual's own free will; and the activity should be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer, or to society at large, although it is recognized that volunteering brings significant benefit to the volunteer as well [16]. The Universal Declaration of Volunteering interprets volunteering as a creative and mediating action that builds healthy, sustainable communities that respect the dignity of all people; empowers people to exercise their rights as human beings and thus to improve their lives; helps solve social, cultural, economic, and environmental problems; and builds a more humane and just society through worldwide cooperation [17].

The International Labour Organization (ILO) proposes that 'volunteer work' is unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organization or directly for others outside their own household (ILO). UN Volunteers [9], articulating the universal nature and values of volunteering, say that it is a human activity, a basic expression of human relationships that occurs in every society in the world [18, 19]. Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as an activity which always takes place through a not-for-profit organization or project and is: of benefit to the community and the volunteer; undertaken of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion; done for no financial gains; in a position not designated as paid; and, underpinned by the principles of volunteering" [20].

Efforts to define volunteer action underline and promote the key principles of volunteering, which highlight that volunteer action is a legitimate way for citizens to participate in the activities of their community, respect the rights, dignity, and culture of others, tolerate diversity and difference, and promote human rights and equality. The terms that define it and the form of its expression may vary in different languages and cultures, but the values that drive it are common and universal [9].

Whittlesea Community

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) is a community-based organization that provides services in the City of Whittlesea. The City of Whittlesea is the third largest multicultural city in the state of Victoria, Australia. Almost half the city's population consists of people from "Culturally and Linguistically Diverse" (CALD) community backgrounds [21]. Within this context, WCC is founded on working in partnership with the local community through community volunteering to identify, plan, and implement relevant local service responses to local issues and community needs. The WCC's Committee of Management is also predominantly made up of volunteers, Whittlesea residents, who are involved in its governance, service delivery, and decision-making processes [22]. The

Whittlesea community recognized volunteering as an important opportunity to raise their voices on behalf of themselves and their communities. Their involvement through WCC in various community groups and decision-making bodies, such as the citizens' committee of management and reference groups, demonstrates that volunteering has contributed to building a healthy civil society and a social capital base in the City of Whittlesea.

Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as an activity that always takes place through a not-for-profit organization or project and is of benefit to the community and the volunteer, undertaken of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion, done for no financial gain, in a position not designated as paid, and underpinned by the principles of volunteering" [20].

Volunteering in Australia has continued to grow, making a valuable contribution to society both socially and economically. The Survey conducted nationally in 2006 [1] shows that 5.2 million people (34%) of the Australian population have participated in voluntary work. They contributed 713 million hours to the community through diverse activities. In 2010, 36% of the adult population of the country [1], or 6.1 million people, were involved in some form of volunteer activity. In general, it is said that around 6.4 million Australians, almost a third of the country's population, are involved in their local community by volunteering each year, doing a wide range of tasks [1], which would otherwise have to be paid for or left undone. The contribution of volunteering is not limited to personal and social impacts. Volunteering significantly contributes to the Australian economy. An estimate in 2006-2007 shows that the total contribution of volunteer work to the Australian economy was \$14.6 billion [1].

Personal satisfaction, helping others in the community, contributing to make a difference at the community level, and a sense of belonging to the community are key motivating factors for them to be involved in volunteering [1, 23, 24]. Their stories echo that the social and emotional benefits of volunteering are invaluable, things that money cannot buy, such as a connection with the community or another person [18]. It offers people social contacts and helps reduce feelings of personal isolation and exclusion. It supports a greater sense of self-worth and belonging, challenges stereotypes about different social groups, and contributes to social inclusion and social capital [10, 25].

Australian volunteers have rights and responsibilities and a set of principles to which they agree to adhere. It ensures a best practice model for community volunteers and the organizations they are involved in and sets nationally endorsed and legislated standards for volunteering action [20]. This makes their actions somewhat professional and, hence, accountable.

Community—What Is It?

Collectivity, shared interests, and identification of attachment to a place are some key characteristics that enable us to identify a distinct community. As explained in classical social theory, a human community is a group of people bound together by a set of norms, values, and relationships that are commonly and unquestionably accepted and shared [2]. Green quotes Bauman (2001) [3] and states that the pre-industrial or pre-modern community is one that is characterized by understandings and unquestioned values shared by all its members. It was "reciprocal binding sentiment," and in this kind of community, people remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors. According to Cox (2001) [4], while community is not often defined, its core meaning is usually clear. It usually implies a geographical area within which primary face-to-face relationships dominate a wide range of human activities. Willmott (1984) [24] identifies "community" as seen at a variety of levels from the national to local and in a variety of senses, but clearly the essence is having something in common. According to Willmott (1984) [24], there are three main factors, "3 'I's": Interaction—a relatively large population have personal relationships with others locally; Interests—a relatively large proportion feel that their interests and, perhaps, values, are to some degree the same as those of many of their neighbors; Identity with place—a relatively large proportion recognize an identifiable area and feel attachment to it as a place", that help make a high degree of community sense.

Depleting Community?

Bauman (2001) [3], however, consigns such modern or pre-modern communities to history. He suggests that modernity and its accompanying loss of innocence have forever ended the possibility of a community based on a shared and unquestioned view of morality and truth. He claims that the impact of the Industrial Revolution, the advent of modern transportation, and more recently mass communication and ultimately the Internet, have systematically transformed communities in which the contents of mutual understanding are inexpressible, interminable, and incomprehensible. The mortal blow to the naturalness of communal understanding has already been delivered. Ife (2006) [7] questions whether there is a citizens' collective, what we call community, for us to do community development. Hughes et al. (2006) [6] point out that the daily experience of almost every one of us is that even though we still feel a "community" in terms of our physical attachment to a place or neighborhood, it is hard to understand whether we feel interrelated and interested in care and obligation to our neighbors. The decline of community life has affected the deterioration of emotional health and social well-being of individuals and erosion of humanity [5]. Etzioni (1993) [5] states that Americans have realized the shortcomings of living without communities. Rapidly deteriorating community relationships have created and entrenched various forms of disadvantage in society [11, 14].

Community Volunteering

Community-based program planning and service delivery have become increasingly popular and well-established concepts in human services in most developed countries because they have convincingly recognized the value that community participation can add to people's quality of life and well-being. As shown earlier, community-based organizations like the WCC demonstrate the successful application of community volunteering as a strategy to rebuild disconnected communities. Volunteering can strengthen community connections and bonds. Volunteerism in response to crises not only helps victims and repairs physical damage but also strengthens the psychological sense of community. Specifically, when volunteers show their concern, they provide visible evidence of the value and worth of victims and communities with stronger connections and social capital. These positive impacts seem especially likely when volunteers work to empower community members rather than simply providing for their needs [12].

Sisu Diriya Samaja for School Children

After the end of the decades-long civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka wasted no time and embarked on a massive effort of social reconstruction and reconciliation, which was fully embedded in "social development," which was set to be the country's long-term development goal. Ethnic and religious harmony at the community level was recognized as a fundamental condition for this to be achieved [23]. One of the ambitious efforts to lay the foundation for this fundamental requirement is the "Sisu Diriya Samaja" (Student Courage Societies) project. It was initially launched in the North and Eastern provinces of the country, areas hard hit by war and was intended to expand to other parts of the country in subsequent stages (Figure 1).

The conceptual underpinning was the recognition that people's collective strength empowers them and motivates and mutually supports their own personal and collective progress. Setting the relevant structures for people at the grassroots level to come together and collectively identify and meet their needs is considered the first essential action to take in any development activity based on the empowerment principle [8]. It is believed that the strength of such a harmonious community is key to effective social development at the grassroots level [4].

Sisu Diriya Samajas are social structures that enable community volunteers to participate and connect, become empowered through their activities, and then mobilize themselves into the community as change agents. At the grassroots level, they organize, with the active participation of the local community, various activities for people to work together and become connected and empowered individuals, families, and groups of one community with a shared identity, while the diversity among each other is still recognized and respected [26].

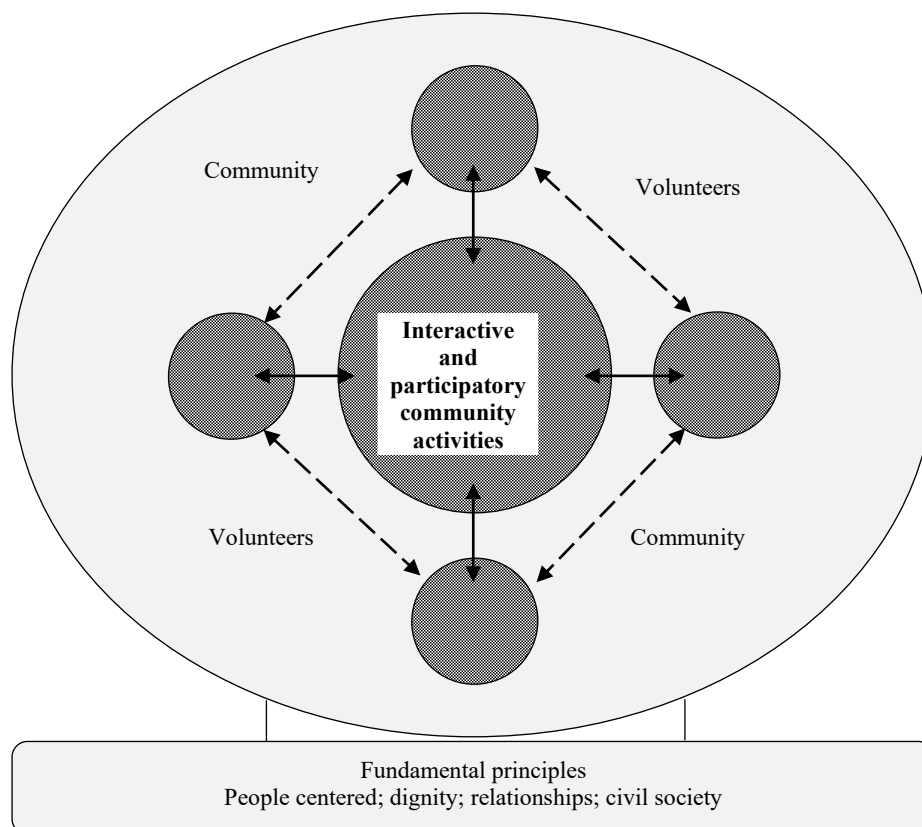


Figure 1. Community volunteering for school children.

Volunteers plan and conduct activities with the active participation of the community, using the material resources available to them. All these activities are based on four key principles.

They are:

1. Keeping people central.
2. Recognizing people's worth and power and helping them exercise it as strengths for their own benefit and then transferring it to the community to benefit everyone through collective strengths.
3. Revitalizing the community through fundamental human relationships to stimulate the attitude of a collective identity and cohesive communities while maintaining unique individual socio-cultural and religious identities.
4. Helping people become involved in social capital building through civil society and providing opportunities to make positive contributions to democratic social progress.

Community Connection Through School Children

Sisu Diriya Samaja volunteers are, at the initial stage of their formation, a mixed group of individuals reflecting the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the communities that they come from. They have all developed close connections and a unique and cohesive community identity. This research focused on identifying how volunteering has socially benefited them, especially in terms of their connections to the local community. They were asked why they were motivated to volunteer and how it benefited them. During the case discussions, almost all of them expressed that the prime motivation for them to be involved in volunteering was to contribute to promoting community engagement and connection, as they had all clearly witnessed the sour consequences of fragmentation and rivalry. They said that "enough was enough" and that they wanted to grab the opportunity to contribute and do something. They all expressed that once they were involved in volunteering, something that they had not anticipated, a change took place within themselves, and they benefited in various ways through their exposure to a wider local community.

“I was involved as a volunteer in some activities with a group of young people, and through our involvement together, I experienced a remarkable change within myself. My confidence, I guess, skyrocketed. I felt very free, became a part of this place, these people, and I was proud of myself and what I was doing” (Case 1).

“While I was going through my volunteering work, I found that it was giving me much more than what I intended to obtain from it. It was definitely much more than what I had anticipated. Before I started volunteering in this new community, everything was new to me, and I had lost myself in that new situation. With my volunteer work, I soon realized that I myself could generate opportunities for me as well as for others. Without being stuck until those opportunities come to us, we can look for them, go for them, and grab them. I know that volunteering gave me that determination, and I could transfer it to others too. You can learn it from others, your interactions; definitely, you get more from your volunteer work, and then you give it to the others” (Case 2).

With this reawakening (I would say that this volunteer work has reawakened after we lost ourselves in the cruel war), I began to enjoy my work in the community, and I became so inspired and enthusiastic. My sense of social worth was renewed. I had become a part of everything around me. I felt that I was accepted, respected, connected, and included, and this feeling boosted my confidence, inner strength, and capacity to be involved in the community equally, like many others. I am unemployed, but every morning I could wake up with ambitions and enthusiasm that I was going to do something worthwhile and something that would be appreciated and socially rewarding (Case 3).

Everyone agreed that volunteering renewed them with a feeling of self-worth and inclusion, a feeling of being a part of the community, which in turn gave them an enormous level of self-satisfaction. When asked about what they thought of the form of volunteering that they were now involved in, and whether it was different from their original perception of volunteering, and if so, how, the majority said that “they now know that the power of this volunteering is to engage and connect people irrespective of all differences, not the charity that people normally think of. They talked about being able to successfully deal with a symptom of “emotional Illness” that they had all, by and large, demonstrated earlier as a result of a high level of stress that they constantly experienced in their personal as well as loosely rooted community lives in the community fragmented and devastated by the war. The rate of unemployment among them is also relatively high. Many indicated that their volunteer work has helped them to control such emotional breakdowns and keep their inner strength intact until they go through the transition and find stability. Volunteering has been a vehicle for them in their new socialization process. Organizational and working culture, new values of respect and recognition, positive, sensitive and respectful communication including social gestures and greetings, signs and body language, habits and prohibitions, cultural sensitivity and respect are some key aspects of community life that they had learned, nurtured and propagated through their volunteer work involvement. With that gradual transition into and reshaping of their own community through volunteering, they had felt fully included and become an integral part of it.

“Volunteering sparked within me the feeling of being included. The sense of being a part of this community makes me feel worth. It is serious, heartfelt, and creates an enormous level of inner satisfaction. I felt that we were “leaves in the air”, because of the feelings of “community uprooting,” “suspicion”, “mistrust”, “isolation”, and isolation within our own country. One of my friends told me that “once we are uprooted, we are uprooted forever”. I have been thinking about this repeatedly over many sleepless nights. It was so stressful, creeping through my life and making me sick. However, this volunteer work has given me the inner strength to gradually escape it. We have learned to respect and tolerate each other. I have never felt that I am different in this place’ (Case 4).

“The inspiration from volunteering made me go with volunteering beyond the main purpose for which I was intentionally doing it. I am now a full-time worker, but I still feel enthusiastic to go back

to the place where I did my volunteer work, hang around there for a while, interact with the wonderful team I mixed with, and talk about how I could still be involved and contribute (Case 5)".

CONCLUSION

The project expected a range of tangible outcomes at both the individual and community levels. Although sometimes rather emotionally expressed, all these stories clearly demonstrate that volunteering is a powerful way by which individuals can be linked back to the community in modern societal situations where a range of factors, such as wars, conflicts, natural disasters, and even the values of individualism, disconnect people from each other and tear apart the community fabric. At the individual level, empowered and progressive individuals who strived for personal transformation exerted positive community-level changes, resulting in the establishment of empowered and connected communities has been building up. When the rate of citizens' involvement in community volunteering is relatively high, as in the case of these communities, positive social repercussions are accumulated and significantly manifested in the community as a healthy civil society and social capital base.

Whether this has been happening was observed under each of the above areas, and what was the change appearing?

1. *Information:* Provision of information empowers local communities to make decisions about how to be involved in their community and ensure that people have access to appropriate services and resources. Community participation and engagement opportunities will be promoted broadly so that the community is informed about how they can get involved.
2. *Integrity:* There must be openness and honesty about the scope and purpose of engagement, and a willingness to trust the community's views, experiences, and aspirations.
3. *Inclusion:* A diverse range of people in the community must have a chance to be involved in the community and have their say, and community engagement processes seek to include and support those who may otherwise not be involved.
4. *Building relationships:* People must have the chance to meet others and form relationships when they get involved or have a say in the community. This will foster relationships between and within communities based on mutual understanding, trust, and respect.
5. *Influence:* It is important that when people participate in the community or have a say, it makes a difference or changes the way things are done. The policies and services, or how organizations work in the community, reflect the input and involvement of local people.
6. *Accessibility:* People who have difficulty participating must be helped with clear access to be involved and have a say.
7. *Local:* It is important that opportunities to have a say and get involved in the community are available locally and that resources available for community engagement prioritize meeting the community participation needs, aspirations, and interests of the local community.
8. *Sustainability:* It is important that opportunities to get involved or have a say have lasting community benefits, and that activities that meet current needs will have a positive influence on the community's ability to meet future needs.

At the societal level, a cumulative contribution to the county's social development through all positive changes at the individual and community levels is expected, and the model emancipating from this whole participatory process to explain it is graphically presented in Figure 1.

Key participants' feeling of ownership of the project ensures project sustainability. The way in which Sisu Diriya Samaja was formed and continued to be functional made the student leaders feel that they were the owners of the project. Sisu Diriya Samaja members are representatives of local communities, so the message they bring to the local communities is accepted without suspicion, as if the strange message of outsiders is involved in top-down planning approaches. Sisu Samaja activities within communities to exert a change are not abstract at all; therefore, they easily become integral to local communities, and the message is quickly linked and absorbed. Consequently, a feeling of ownership of the project emerged and was established among grassroots communities.

Ownership of what they do essentially establishes a feeling of ownership of the outcome. The project process ensures that everyone, not only students, but also community members who are involved in the project at different stages, are included and empowered. The volunteer student leaders and local communities who have sacrificed, taken care of their responsibilities, and done their share of contribution appear to be gradually taking over the responsibility of making sure that a new interethnic and religiously harmonious society is sustainable. By exerting the attitude of ownership among all participants, the project emphasizes the idea that even small sacrifices by everyone in the community will create enormous benefits for all, and it will be sustainable, generating more benefits for future generations and the entire country as a whole because it is of, by, and for themselves. It appears at the grassroots level and in students' creations and demonstrations through various means that they were all talking about and realizing it.

This change has been promoting the attitude that even though there are different community groups in society having established their own, independent ethnic, socio-cultural, and religious identities, the basis of all must be the identity of the collective Sri Lankan community built on the fundamental virtues of human relationships. In all outcomes, what people directly said as expressions, what the students demonstrated in all different means at the social opportunities at local and regional levels, what all individuals and groups manifested in all grassroots and upper social level focus groups, forums, workshops, gatherings and events, there was one unique attitude gradually forming together and widening its' horizons—It was “reciprocal, binding sentiment” and in this kind of community, people remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors. In such a unity which is mainly based on unquestioned relationships, everyone can understand the existence of diversity, tolerating it, respecting it and being harmonious within it. It has been evident across all villages and grassroots communities, where Sisu Diriya Samaja was active. As is inferred from the model depicted in Figure 1, the outcomes of the project, especially at the grassroots, have already begun demonstrating the signs of emergence of such a society in the North-East regions of Sri Lanka, where all that tolerance, respect and harmony among beautiful diversity had been just a nightmare during the period of last three decades.

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