

Volunteering and Community Connection: Benefits of Community Volunteering to Connect People Together Through School Children and Build 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, and 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 modern made volunteer action somewhat professional. The stories of thousands of volunteers, all around the world, demonstrate that modern volunteering generates benefits to both individual as well as community as a whole. It connects individuals to their communities and helps promoting 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 together 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 remunerations. Its’ charitable meaning still exists, but, however, the stories of thousands of volunteers these days, all around the world, transcend a new message that modern volunteering, as a community level action, generates enormous social benefits to both individual as well as 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 enable them to influence in various ways key social, economic, cultural, and even political, affairs and processes that affect them in the community. Moreover, it makes people feel that they are connected and belonged to one cohesive community with a shared identity. This is seen especially 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] So that modern volunteering helps bringing people together and building 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 country, Australia [5]. The writer then goes on to promote the opinion that modern volunteering can be successfully applied as a strategy to build harmonious community within diversity. In this regard, the writer again talks about his experience as a volunteer in a community level social development project in Northern Sri Lanka [6–15]

What is Modern Volunteering?

There is no universally-based definition of volunteering. The United Nations [16] (2001) 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 (United Nations: [16]2001). 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 build a more humane and just society through worldwide cooperation (IAVE: [17]1990).

The International Labor Organisation (ILO) proposes that 'volunteer work' is, "an unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside their own household" (ILO). UN Volunteers (UNV: [9]2011), articulating universal nature and values of volunteering says 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 organisation 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" (Volunteering Australia: [20]2003).

The efforts to define volunteer action underline and promote the key principles of volunteering which highlight that volunteer action: is a legitimate way in which citizens can participate in the activities of their community, respects the rights, dignity and culture of others; tolerates diversity and difference, and promotes human rights and equality. The terms which define it and the form of its expression may vary in different languages and cultures, but the values which drive it are common and universal (Leigh:[9] 2011).

Whittlesea Community

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) is a Community based organization and has been providing services in the city of Whittlesea. City of Whittlesea is the third largest multicultural city of

the state of Victoria in 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. 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 (WCC:[22] 2011). Wittlesea community recognize volunteering as an important opportunity to raise their voice on behalf of themselves and their communities'. Their involvement through Whittlesea Community Connections in the various community groups and decision making bodies like citizen's committee of management and reference groups demonstrate that volunteering has contributed building a healthy civil society and a social capital base in the city of Whittlesea.

Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia defines volunteering as an activity which always takes place through a not for profit organisation 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" (Volunteering Australia: [20]2003).

Volunteering in Australia has continued to grow making a valuable contribution to society in both social and economic. The Survey conducted nationally in 2006 (ABS: [1]2007) shows that 5.2 million people (34%) of the Australian population have participated in voluntary work. They have contributed 713 million hours to the community across diverse activities. In 2010, 36% of the adult population of the country (ABS [1]2010), 6.1 million people, has been 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, is involved in their local community by volunteering each year, doing a wide range of tasks (ABS: [1]2011), which would otherwise have to be paid for or left undone. The contribution of volunteering is by no means limited to personal and social impact. Volunteering contributes significantly 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 (ABS: [1]2011).

Personal satisfaction, helping others in the community, contribution to make a difference at the community level, and sense of belonging to the community are key motivating factors for them to be involved in volunteering (ABS: [1]2007) [23-24]. Their stories echo that social and emotional benefits of volunteering are invaluable, things that money can't buy, e.g. like a connection with community or another person (Volunteering Australia: [18]2011). It offers people social contacts, and helps reduce feelings of personal isolation and exclusion. It supports a greater sense of self-worth, belonging, and challenges the stereotypes about different social groups, and contributes to social inclusion and social capital (Leong[10] 2008; Kamal and Melissa [25]2006).

Australian volunteers have rights and responsibilities and set of principles which they agree to be adhered to. It ensures a best practice model for the community volunteers and the organisations they are involved in, and set nationally endorsed and legislated standards for volunteering action (Volunteering Australia:[20] 2003). This makes their action somewhat professional, and hence accountable.

Community – what is it?

Collectivity, shared interests and identification of attachment to a place are some key characteristic which enables us to identify a distinct community. As explained in the classical social theory, human community is a group of people bound together by a set of certain norms, values and relationships that are commonly and unquestionably accepted and shared (Anderson and Kasperson: [2]2000). Green quotes Bauman [3] (2001) and says that the pre-industrial or pre-modern community is one that was

characterised by understandings and unquestioned values shared by all its members. It was “reciprocal binding sentiment” and in this kind of community people remains essentially united in spite of all separating factors. According to Cox[4] (2001), while community is not often defined, the core meaning is usually clear. It usually implies a geographical area within which primary face-to-face relationships dominate over a wide range of human activities. Willmott [24] (1984) 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 [24] (1984) 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 neighbours; Identity with place - a relatively large proportion recognise an identifiable area and feel attachment to it as a place”, that help make a high degree of community sense.

Depleting Community?

Bauman [3] (2001), however, consigns such a modern or pre-modern community to history. He suggests that modernity and its accompanying loss of innocence has finished for ever the possibility of a community based on a shared and unquestioned view about 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 seen the transformation of community 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 [7] (2006) questions whether there is a citizens’ collective what we call community for us to do community development. Huges and others [6] (2006) point out that 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 neighbourhood, it is hard to understand whether we feel interrelated and interested in care and obligation to our neighbours. The decline of community life has affected deteriorating of emotional health and social wellbeing of individuals, and erosion of humanity (Etzioni:[5] 1993 and 1995). Etzioni [5] (1993) says that American people have realized the shortcomings of lives living without communities. Rapidly deteriorating community relationships have created and entrenched various forms of disadvantage in the society (Payne: [14] 2005; Morales and Sheafor:[11] 2002; Morales et.al:[11] 2010).

Community Volunteering

Community-based program planning and service delivery has become increasingly popular, and well established too, concept in human services in most of the developed countries because they have convincingly recognized the value that community participation can add to the peoples’ quality of life and wellbeing. As was shown earlier, community-based organisations like WCC demonstrate successful application of community volunteering as strategy to rebuild disconnected communities. Volunteering can lead to strengthen community connections and bonds. Volunteerism in response to crisis not only helps victims and repair physical damage, but likely also strengthens psychological sense of community. Specifically when volunteers turn out to show their concern, they provide visible evidence of the volume and worth of victims and communities with more and stronger bonds of connections and social capital. This positive impacts seems especially likely when volunteers work to empower community members rather than simply providing for their needs (Omoto, et.al [12]2012)

Sisu Diriya Samaja for School Children

Just after the end of decades’ dragged civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka wasted no time and embarked on a massive effort of social reconstruction and reconciliation, and this was fully embedded in “social development” which was set to be the country’s long-term development goal. Also, ethnic and religious harmony at the community level was recognized a fundamental condition for this to be achieved (Wijesinghe: [23]2006). One of the ambitious efforts for laying foundation for this fundamental requirement to be met is “Sisu Diriya Samaja” (Student Courage Societies) project. It was initially launched in the North and Eastern provinces of the country, the areas hard hit by war, and was intended to expand to the other parts of the country in the subsequent stages (Figure1).

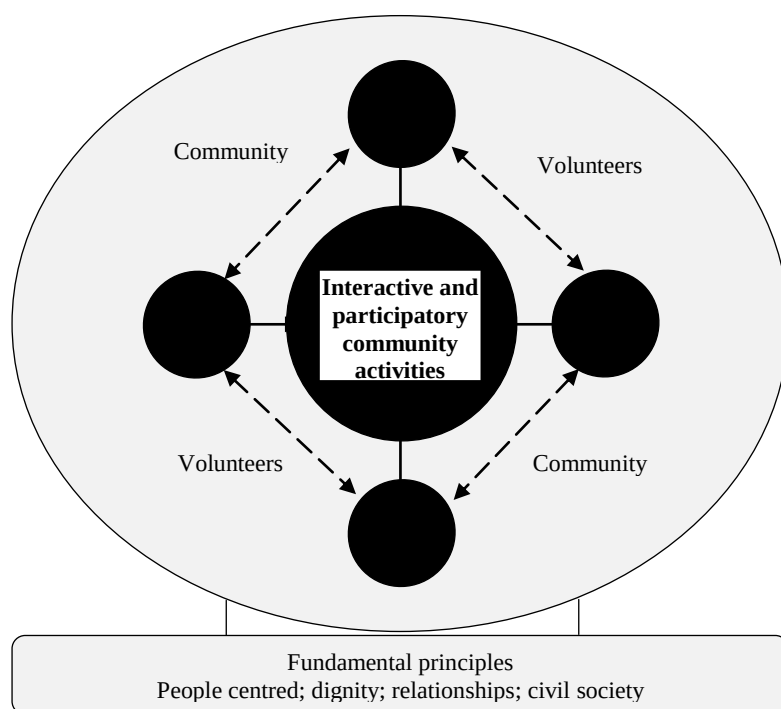


Figure 1. Community volunteering for school children.

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 to come together and collectively identify and meet their needs is considered to be a first essential action to take in any development activity based on empowerment principle (Kenny:[8] 2006). It is believed that the strength of such a harmonious community set key essential for social development process to take place effectively at the grassroots (Cox:[4] 2001).

Sisu Diriya Samajas are social structures for community volunteers to participate and connect together, become empowered through their activities, and then mobilize themselves into the community as change agents. At grassroots, they organize, with active participation of 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].

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

They are:

1. Keeping people central;
2. Recognizing people's worth and power and help them exercise it as strengths for their own benefits and then transfer 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; and
4. Helping people become involved in social capital building through civil society and have opportunity to make their positive contribution to democratic social progress.

Community connection through School Children

Sisu Diriya Samaja volunteers are, at the initial stage of its' formation, a mixed group of individuals reflecting socio-economic and cultural diversity of the communities that they come from.

They have all developed close connection and sense of unique and cohesive community identity. This research was focused on them to identify how volunteering has socially benefited them, especially in terms of their connections to the local community. They were asked why they had been motivated to be involved in volunteering and how it has 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 promote community engagement and connection as they had all clearly witnessed the sour consequences of fragmentation and rivalry. They said that, “enough was enough” and they wanted to grab the opportunity to contribute and do something. They all expressed that, once they were involved in volunteering, something that they unanticipated, a change, took place within themselves, and they benefited variously through their exposure to wider local community.

“I was involved as a volunteer in some activities with a group of young people, with our involvements together I was experiencing 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 thought it would be. Before I started volunteer work, in this new community, everything was new to me, and in that new situation I had lost myself. With my volunteer work, I soon realized that I myself could generate opportunities for me as well as for others too. Without being standstill until those opportunities come to us, we are able to look for them and go for them and grab them. I know 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 reawaken after we lost ourselves in the cruel war) I began to enjoy my work in the community and, it became so inspired and enthusiastic. The sense of my social worth renewed. I had become a part of all around me. I felt that I was accepted, respected, connected and included and, this feeling boosted my confidence, inner strength and the feeling of 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 again something worthwhile as well as something which would be appreciated and socially rewarding (case 3).

Everyone agreed that volunteering renewed them with a feeling of self-worth and inclusion, 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, and whether it was different from their original perception of volunteering, and if so, how, majority said that “they now know that the power of this volunteering is to engage and connect people together irrespective of all differences, not the charity that people normally think of. They talked about being able to be deal with successfully a symptom of “emotional Illness” that they had all by and large demonstrated earlier as a result of 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 the 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 prohibits, cultural sensitivity and respect are some key aspects of community life that they had become learn, nurtured and propagated through their volunteer work involvement. With that gradual transition in to 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 seriously heart-felt and creates enormous level of inner-satisfaction. I felt that we were “leaves in the air”, because of the feelings of “community uprooting” “suspicion”, “mistrust”, “isolation” etc. within our own country. One of my friends told me that “once we are uprooted we are uprooted forever”. I had been thinking of this, again and again, in many sleepless nights. It was so stressful, creeping through my life always and making me sick. Yet, this volunteer work involvement has given me inner strength to gradually escape it. We have learnt to respect and tolerate each other. I have never felt in this place that I am different” (case 4).

“The inspiration from volunteering made me to go with volunteering beyond the main purpose that I was intentionally doing it for. 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 had mixed with, and talk about how I could still be involved and contribute (case 5)”.

CONCLUSION

The project had expected a range of tangible outcomes at both individual and community levels. All those stories, though sometimes rather emotionally expressed, clearly demonstrate that volunteering is a powerful way by which individuals can be linked back to community in a modern societal situations where a range of factors, for example, wars, conflicts, natural disasters, and even the values of individualism etc., disconnect people from each other and torn apart the community fabric. At the individual level, empowered and progressive individuals who strived for their personal transformation had exerted positive community level changes and, as a result, empowered and connected communities has been building up. When the rate of citizens’ involvement in community volunteering is relatively high, as of the case with these communities, those 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 being observed under each of the above areas what was the change appearing?

1. *Information:* Provision of information empowers local communities to make decision about how to be involved in their community and ensures people have access to appropriate services and resources. Community participation and engagement opportunities will be promoted broadly, so the community is informed about how they can get involved.
2. *Integrity:* It is important that there is openness and honesty about the scope and purpose of engagement, that there is a willingness to trust the community’s views, experiences and aspirations.
3. *Inclusion:* It is important a diverse range of people in the community have a chance to be involved in the community and have their say, and that community engagement processes seek to include and support those who may otherwise not be involved.
4. *Building relationships:* It is important that people have the chance to meet other people form relationships with others 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, that it makes a difference or changes 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:* It is important that people who have difficulty participating to get involved and have a say are helped with cleared access to be involved.
7. *Local:* It is important that the 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 say have lasting community benefits, and that activities that meet current needs will have positive influence on communities ability to meet future needs.

At the societal level, a cumulative contribution to 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.

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

Ownership to what they do essentially establish the feeling of ownership to outcome as well. The project process makes sure everyone, not only students, even 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 appeared to be gradually taking over the responsibility of making sure that 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 entire country as a whole because it is of, by and for themselves. It appears at the grassroots, and also in students' creations and demonstrations in various means, that they were all taking about and realizing it.

This change has been promoting the attitude that even though there are different community groups in the society having established their own, independent ethnic, socio-cultural and religious identities, the basis of they all must be the identity of 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 is capable of understanding the existence of diversity, tolerate it, respect it and being harmonious within it. It has been evident across all villages, grassroots communities, where Sisu Diriya Samaja were activating. As is inferred into 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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