

Book Review

Perspectives on Volunteering: Voices from the South

Jacqueline Butcher and Christopher J. Einolf (Eds.)

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While closely linked with similar concepts such as social activism, solidarity and civic service, volunteering has attracted academic interest and became a vast research area on its own (Hustinx, Cnaan & Handy, 2010). However, the contributors of this book – and other scholars elsewhere (see Lopez-Franco & Shahrokh, 2015; Burns, et. al., 2015) – have recognized the limited research-based understanding of volunteering in the global South. Studies on volunteering in Southern contexts often use an exogenous lens: volunteer work is measured and/or explored using supposedly ‘standard’ conceptual frames but may have a Northern bias (p. v).

Perspectives on Volunteering, edited by Jacqueline Butcher and Christopher J. Einolf, aims to directly address these research gaps and issues. By drawing on diverse volunteering expressions and experiences in Asia, Africa and Latin America, this collection amplifies the much-needed Voices from the South in moving forward the field of volunteer research and tangential areas like non-profit, third sector and philanthropy.

This collection accomplishes several aims. First, it offers a fresh perspective into whether and how cross-country and intra-communal differences in contexts and cultures may significantly affect volunteering assumptions, approaches and practices. Second, it discusses North-South volunteering practices not only by virtue of their differences but in the light of how there may be points for comparison, convergence and/or conflict. Third, it does not only highlight the challenges surrounding volunteering in the South, but also presents best practices on how individuals and institutions navigate through context-specific issues.

The book is divided into two major parts: (1) cross-national approaches and (2) individual country case studies. The introductory chapter penned by Butcher and Einolf skilfully discusses the complexity of volunteering as a concept and, therefore, as a research field. They have convincingly set out the key proposition guiding the rest of the chapters: volunteerism, when seen as a form of person-to-person helping activity, is universal but to a varying degree have refinements that are specific to a particular place and time (p. vi). These various expressions, complexities and refinements were explored in the rest of the book.

The book begins by exploring cross-country comparative data on volunteer activity across the world. Chapter 2 by Lester Salamon, Megan Haddock and S. Wojciech Sokolowski takes on the

important yet challenging task of ‘measuring’ the magnitude of volunteer activity to include informal and direct volunteering which are often argued to be more common in Southern contexts. On the contrary, they found that the inclusion of direct volunteering in comparative data fails to “narrow the gaps between the relative scale of volunteer work” between the North and the South (p. 45). However, they offer a caveat: they had very little of comparative data to draw from and those available were also not unproblematic. The country-specific case studies of Mario Roitter in Argentina (Chapter 9) and Gustavo Verduzco in Mexico (Chapter 10) adds to this issue by arguing that current frameworks fail to grasp several volunteer activities in Southern countries leading to underreporting in surveys. They proposed a strategy of tailor-fitting these tools to their specific country context. Painting with a broad brush through statistical measures, while important (and heavily used in several of the chapters in this book), only offers one perspective of volunteer activity. The remaining chapters complements such view by looking, more intently, into the contextual issues surrounding volunteering.

Several cases tackled different issues surrounding the interplay of various institutions and their impact on the volunteer landscape. In China (Chapter 11) Ying Xu has found that the state plays a key role in encouraging, regulating and even banning certain voluntary efforts. Elizabeth Hacker, Alexandra Picken and Simon Lewis (Chapter 3), presented a fascinating picture of how the involvement of formal non-government organisations (NGOs) and the state government in local development efforts have impacted the community’s perception towards volunteering in Kenya, Mozambique and Nepal where long-standing traditions of communal help already exist. Kenya saw the rise of a stipend culture: some local volunteers ranked NGOs according to the amount of stipend they provided and on occasions, they become suspicious if stipends were lower than assumed ‘standard’. Some community members became suspicious towards volunteers’ roles, motivations, rewards and recruitment. Susan Appe, Nadia Rubaii and Kerry Stamp (Chapter 8) offer a unique perspective on how an indigenous Peruvian framework of volunteering (i.e. anyi – the Andean concept of reciprocity often translated ‘today for you, tomorrow for me’) and a more Northern framework (i.e. International Service Learning), while different, were able to co-exist in a project and produced effective results.

Some insights could also be gained by looking into the countries' history and socio-economic situations. Helene Perold and Lauren Graham (Chapter 6) found that most volunteers in Southern Africa face similar poverty and vulnerability as the individuals they are serving (i.e. 'poor helping the poor'). They argued the need to problematize the extent to which community-based organisations are expected to deliver services which are supposedly the responsibility of the state, "placing additional burden on already stretched and vulnerable communities" (p. 125). Lack of supportive infrastructure form part of the reasons why corporate volunteering struggles to flourish in the global South (Kenn Allen and Monica Galiano, Chapter 5). Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan and Valentina Gevorgyan trace the struggles of revitalising volunteer activity in Armenia (Chapter 12) which, they argued, is hampered by the country's communist experience. Sema Akboga (Chapter 13) discusses how Turkey's history and current political issues may have led to the low volunteer activity in the county.

Several cases turned the magnifying glass towards the volunteers framing volunteering as a practice that benefits the volunteer as well. Aislinn Delany and Perold (Chapter 4) found that national civic service programmes helped young people in the sub-Saharan Africa develop skills and expertise for employability. Jacob Mwathi Mati (Chapter 7) found that youth volunteer exchange programmes in Eastern and Southern Africa help cultivate shared inter-African identity, solidarity and integration.

In reading the book, I was left with the impression that although not exhaustive, Perspectives cast its net widely in geographical reach and topics of discussion offering both familiar and unique perspectives on volunteering. This may be useful to academics, practitioners and/or to volunteers themselves. Having a collection as insightful and relevant as this leads one to ask: how do we move this academic conversation forward?

Adding to the recommendations of the editors in the conclusion (Chapter 14) and reflecting on this anthology, it seems to me that volunteering research would best benefit from comparative studies that do not necessarily tease out differences between North and South (i.e. 'widening' the North-South divide) rather, those that explore whether and how dominant discourses and practices of volunteering are disseminated, reproduced, and/or resisted in different volunteering communities. Several comparative discussions in this collection has already shown that the variations of

volunteering are more complex than simplified dichotomies between North-South, formal-informal and/or modern-traditional.

There are still many areas to be explored and the methodology need not to be limited to improving cross-country measurements or conducting large-scale surveys. The findings of Hacker and colleagues in this collection has demonstrated the potential of ethnographic-style or participatory research to produce valuable data in this area. Perhaps to further explore Southern voices through an endogenous lens, there is a need to go to the heart of their ideas surrounding development itself, asking questions like: what does volunteering and/or development mean to local volunteers in the South? Research on volunteering in the South is an important and fascinating area and may have the potential to inform and improve future practice. This anthology is an important step forward.

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