

The current picture of volunteering in Australia

International Year of the Volunteers (IYV) Follow-up
Report to the UN General Assembly

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About Volunteering Australia

Volunteering Australia is the national peak body for volunteering in Australia, providing a unified voice on volunteering that is recognised and respected across all sectors – community, corporate and government.

Over the past decade, Volunteering Australia has established strong partnerships with key stakeholders and developed a solid base of research and resources, including definitive foundation documents that remain as relevant today and for the future as an important framework for volunteering in Australia. These foundation documents include:

- The National Agenda for Volunteering: Beyond the International Year of Volunteers;
- The National Standards for Involving Volunteers in Not-for-Profit Organisations;
- The Volunteering Policy Consultation Framework; and
- The Definition and Principles of Volunteering.

Snapshot of Volunteering in Australia

In Australia, volunteers work in all spheres of community and across many sectors including health, welfare and community services, emergency services, arts, culture and heritage, the environment, sport and recreation, education and youth development, overseas aid, animal welfare, human rights and in religious organisations.

The latest data available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics¹ shows that In Australia there are more than five million active volunteers over the age of 18. They represent around 34% of the adult population and between them provide approximately 713 million volunteer hours per annum.

Ironmonger² estimates that in Australia volunteering is responsible for around \$42 billion of economic activity annually. The total imputed dollar value of the time donated to welfare service alone by volunteers (\$27.4 billion) is almost double the total cash amount spent by all governments and non-government sources (\$13.7 billion) in Australia.

Australia has in excess of 700,000 third-sector organisations, the majority of which involve volunteers in some capacity. ABS data shows that although most of these do not have paid staff, they are responsible for 3.3% of GDP, and if you include the financial value of volunteer activity, the figure rises to 4.7%³.

Changing patterns

The Australian Bureau of Statistics, through its Voluntary Work Surveys (conducted in 1995, 2000 and 2006) show us that participation in volunteering continues to increase, from 24% of the adult population in 1995, to 32% in 2000 and to 34% in 2006. However, it is important to note that across most age groups, the median amount of time contributed to volunteering is decreasing. The greatest decrease is being seen in the 35 – 44 year age group, with the participation in hours contributed showing a substantial decrease. For men in this age group a decrease of approx. 50% is recorded falling from 74 hours in 1995 to 38 hours in 2006. For women in this age group a decrease of approx. 25% is recorded falling from 78 hours in 1995 to 58 hours in 2006.

The Volunteering Infrastructure

The development and sustainability of volunteering in Australia is supported in significant ways by what is best termed the volunteering infrastructure – the network of national, state and local volunteer resource centres dedicated to the promotion, advocacy and support of volunteering.

¹ ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2007: Voluntary Work, Australia 2006. Cat. No. 4441.0. Canberra: ABS

² Ironmonger D: Measuring volunteering in economic terms, Volunteers and Volunteering. Federation Press, Sydney 2000 pp. 56 - 72

³ Lyons M: Third Sector: The contribution of nonprofit and cooperative enterprises in Australia p.17

Broadly the infrastructure in Australia consists of a national peak body for volunteering (Volunteering Australia), seven state and territory volunteering peak bodies and an estimated 90 regional or local organisations that identify themselves as volunteer resource centres.

The Role of the Volunteering Infrastructure

The role of the volunteering infrastructure can be best described by a set of core functions that are carried out to varying degrees depending on whether the organisation is at the national, state or local level.

The core functions can be summarised as:

- Strategic development of volunteering to meet human, social and environmental need;
- Policy advice and advocacy on volunteering issues;
- Promotion and support of best practice in volunteer involvement through the development or provision of tools, resources and training for the sector;
- Promotion of volunteering and its principles to ensure that volunteers are protected and the activity of volunteering is sustainable; and
- Brokerage through the provision of information and referral services to prospective volunteers.

Volunteering in the Social Inclusion Context

In Australia, volunteering is increasingly viewed within a broader context defined variously as social inclusion, civic engagement or community participation.

While recognising that volunteering is only one mechanism by which social capital develops, community capacity grows and citizens become engaged, the unique role of formal volunteering needs to be recognised and supported by Government as does the more informal forms of volunteer participation and engagement.

Formal volunteering structures and opportunities are an effective means by which people join together in groups to provide a service or generate activities for others, and at the same time find expression of their own citizenship. Many of the services provided by the Australian community service, health and welfare sectors are underpinned by the work and contribution of volunteers, not to mention the important role of volunteers in providing safe and enjoyable community environments through their work in the emergency services and sport and recreation sectors.

This is not to say that informal participation and mechanisms for broader civic engagement are not important or valid. Indeed they are critical and more study into the linkages between formal and informal participation and the creation of social capital and strong communities is needed.

Emerging Trends and Challenges

Despite the increasing profile of volunteering and community recognition of the mutual benefits of participating in volunteering activities, there are many issues and challenges being faced by the volunteer sector. These issues and challenges, if not adequately addressed, risk undermining the sustainability and outcome of volunteering in Australia.

Trends in Volunteering

There are a number of emerging trends in volunteering impacting the volunteer sector. We are seeing a change in the way in which individuals are engaging in volunteering, with it becoming rarer for individuals to give a long-term commitment to volunteer for one specific organisation. Short term opportunities, often with a focus on a particular project or skill, are becoming more and more in demand.

This trend towards more flexible volunteering opportunities can be attributed to the distinctions we are seeing between different demographic groups of volunteers regarding their motivations for volunteering and how they choose to contribute. For example:

- Young people are increasingly engaging in volunteering, and as well as sharing motivations for volunteering common across all demographics of volunteers, also see volunteering as an opportunity to learn new skills, gain a reference, and potentially create a pathway to paid employment.
- More companies are involved in corporate volunteering and support their employees through employee-volunteering programs. These opportunities are also largely focused on one-off, or short term project volunteer involvement.
- Organisations are looking at how to increase the involvement of individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) into their volunteer programs. These individuals often see volunteering as a way of increasing their understanding of the broader Australian community, an opportunity to practice their English skills, and the chance to meet new people and create social networks.

Critical Issues

Supply and demand issues

A critical issue facing the volunteer sector is the disparity between supply of and demand for volunteer labour. While ABS statistics portray an increase in the number of volunteers, a hidden trend faced by certain critical sub-sectors such as aged care, shows a decline in the number of people engaging in volunteering. Combined with the decline in the number of hours contributed per individual this trend signals an impending resource predicament.

Evidence given to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth on 7th May 2008 supports this view:

“When we look at community and welfare volunteering, which is the focus of this gathering, it is very clearly declining. The percentage of adult population who engage in that kind of volunteering is down, the actual real number of people—although the population is growing—is down, and the hours contributed are considerably down.”⁴

This predicament is further compounded by the changing demographics and trend towards short term, project based volunteer opportunities. As discussed previously this trend is providing significant challenges for organisations that continue to rely on regular volunteer commitment in order to deliver services. Support is needed to promote and foster change in volunteer involving organisations so that new roles are developed, new approaches to encouraging diversity are implemented, and new ways of delivering services are explored.

The response to this issue will involve targeted strategies in recruitment, training and retention of volunteers.

Ageing population

Australia's population is ageing. Driving this trend are declining fertility rates and the post-World War 2 'baby boomer' generation entering retirement age. In forty years time, the proportion of Australians over the age of 65 is expected to double to around 25 per cent.⁵

⁴ Lyons M *House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth 7th May 2008*

⁵ Commonwealth of Australia (2004) *Australia's Demographic Challenges*, pg 1

The impact of an ageing population on volunteering must be considered in the context of:

- the volunteering sectors experience of working with older volunteers;
- the relationship between employment and volunteering; and
- the characteristics of the baby boomer age cohort.

Some of the challenges of an ageing population for volunteering may be associated with particular types of organisations. The 65 and over age groups are strongly represented in the community/welfare, religious and health areas of volunteer work. Conversely, this age cohort is underrepresented in the areas of sport and recreation and education/training/youth development.⁶ These types of organisations may experience difficulty in attracting volunteers as the population ages.

In discussing the impacts of the ageing population on volunteering, we should not assume the baby boomer cohort will exhibit the behaviours and skill characteristics of the current 65 years-plus generation. For example, the baby boomer cohort will bring more developed information technology skills to their volunteering involvements, increasing for older volunteers opportunities in administration and IT, where volunteers over the age of 65 are currently underrepresented.

Formal volunteering vs. Informal volunteering

The definition of **formal** volunteering adopted by Volunteering Australia recognises four essential principles. The volunteering effort must be:

- Of benefit to the community and the volunteer;
- Of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion;
- For no financial payment; and
- In designated volunteer positions only.

However, we know that **informal** volunteering is part of a growing trend where groups are forming in local communities in response to specific social needs. These groups can include::

- Environmental groups;
- Recreational and community arts groups;
- Culturally and linguistically diverse groups; and
- Social action groups.

Informal volunteering can often be characterized being:

- Largely unfunded and often not incorporated;
- Not bound by legislative requirements;
- Entirely reliant on volunteers;
- Cause driven;
- Spontaneous – come and go depending on need; and
- Often operate outside risk management framework – e.g no insurance coverage or OH&S policies.

We can see from the above that community involvement in society is complex and rich in its diversity. The relationship between formal and informal volunteering is relatively un-chartered, and further consideration needs to be given to identifying ways of measuring informal volunteering and recognising the enormous contribution it brings to communities.

Additionally, there is also a risk that the word *volunteer* is losing its relevance. For example, the stereotypical volunteer (middle aged woman working in an op shop) doesn't always resonate with

⁶ ABS (2001) *Voluntary Work Survey*, pg 23

younger generations of volunteers, and for some individuals from CALD backgrounds, often there is no equivalent for the word *volunteer* in their language.

The word volunteer can also often be misused, with people calling an activity 'volunteering' when in fact it is not. For example, there has been a recent announcement by an Australian university that commencing in 2010, it will be compulsory for all undergraduate students to participate in some form of community / voluntary work. At other times activities that stem from some form of mutual obligation have also been described as voluntary activities e.g. confusion between the voluntary work initiative and community work or work for the dole programs. These language issues challenge us as a sector to consider whether the formal definition of volunteering is too restrictive and how can we acknowledge, support and recognise other modes of community giving.

Legislative Issues

Unlike paid staff, volunteers are not always covered by legislation that protects or compensates employees within the workplace. Many volunteers are exposed to risk, injury, discrimination or prejudice while others carry huge financial responsibility or are exposed to legal liability.

On the flip side, volunteer involving organisations often report feeling weighed down by 'bureaucratic red tape' and that they are wasting limited resources on often onerous compliance activities rather than allowing organisations and their volunteers to remain focused on the organisational purpose. One example of the impact of public policy requirements on organisations and volunteers, concerns an increased requirement in the number of background checks (police checks and working with children checks) of volunteers.

Feedback from the 2008 National Survey of Volunteering Issues shows that some of the negative impacts of background checking reported by volunteering organisations and volunteers alike are:

- Lengthy processing times for checks;
- Complex processes; and
- Lack of transferability of checks between states and organisations.

Resource Issues

Volunteers are unpaid. This fact often results in the false assumption that the involvement of volunteers has no financial resource implications for either the volunteer involving organisation or the volunteer themselves. While as a community we applaud the financial contributions volunteers make to individual organisations and the broader economy, insufficient attention is given to calculate and recognise the financial overheads needed to support volunteers in their work.

Specific examples of organisational resources needed to support volunteer involvement and provide a quality volunteering experience, include training for volunteers and managers of volunteers, affordable streamlined processes for police checks, and reimbursement of volunteer out-of-pocket expenses.

Rising cost of volunteering

During October 2006, Volunteering Australia conducted an open online survey to determine what the real costs of volunteering are. Survey findings showed that 88% of volunteers incurred out-of-pocket expenses averaging \$700 per annum that were not reimbursed.⁷

Findings from the recent National Survey of Volunteering Issues, show that out-of-pocket expenses continue to be important to volunteers and organisations, with fuel the greatest expense incurred by volunteers and also the greatest expense reimbursed by organisations. Other significant out-of-

⁷ Volunteering Australia: What are the real costs of volunteering? Research Bulletin, 2007

pocket expenses incurred by volunteers are telephone calls from mobile or home phones, postage, public transport costs and uniforms.

Role of Government – recommendations for support

The Australian Government is well positioned to more fully harness the community benefits of volunteering by increasing the level of support provided to volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

The most successful and enjoyable volunteering outcomes occur when volunteers are able to easily access sustainable volunteering opportunities and are well supported in their work. To this end, the Australian Government's support for volunteering should be focused on both supply and demand supporting the individual volunteer involving organisations that create opportunities for individuals to become involved. Additionally, Government can support volunteering by:

- Better coordination between Federal, State and Local Government to achieve a unified policy framework;
- Reduction of duplication at a local level through the support of shared services and infrastructure
- Targeted recruitment strategies for specific age cohorts, skill sets and sub sectors.

Increased funding of the volunteering infrastructure

Greater government financial support for the volunteering infrastructure - the network of national, state and local volunteer resource centres is needed, to enhance their ability to involve and engage with volunteers and increase general community awareness of volunteering.

Although a key function, it must be recognised that the volunteering infrastructure does much more than provide brokerage services to prospective volunteers. Volunteer centres at all levels provide expert advice and consultancy to organisations in best practice in volunteer involvement. They also provide training and professional development for managers of volunteers, create, facilitate and maintain key information and professional networks, and above all, they identify and advocate on issues affecting volunteering.

The organisations within the volunteering infrastructure have a critical role to play in supporting the sector to develop new and more diverse volunteering opportunities and engage more effectively with people of all demographics.

Measuring volunteering

One of the strongest ways in which volunteers seek to be recognised is through the measurement and valuing of their contribution. Measurement of volunteer effort can be achieved by Government through the following ways:

- Fund research into issues that affect volunteers and volunteering;
- Expand upon, and permanently include questions relating to volunteering in the Census population of Australia; and
- Actively support Australia's involvement in the International Labour Organization's (ILO) *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work* produced by the Johns Hopkins Centre for Civil Society Studies.

Understanding the impact of public policy

Governments need to protect and promote the important contribution made to Australian society through volunteering by ensuring policies a) enhance the status of volunteering, and b) work to facilitate volunteering.

Protecting and building on the contribution of volunteers requires that public policy is supportive of volunteering, and that investment in the volunteering sector itself is geared towards building the capacity of the sector. Government can support the right for volunteers to have legal status and protection by:

- Committing to lead the development of an intergovernmental working group to identify all relevant legislation across jurisdictions and develop a process to achieve legislative change and amendments – particular legislation would include worker's compensation, occupational health and safety, anti-discrimination and equal employment opportunity;
- Ensure that any new legislation or policy is reflective of the Principles of Volunteering.

Acknowledge the cost of volunteering

When working to create a better environment in which volunteering can flourish Government must ensure that volunteers and volunteer involving organisations are adequately resourced for their tasks. Volunteers must never be regarded as simply a 'cheap' input or a money-saving device, instead the costs of supporting their work should be considered as an investment in Australian society. To this end, Government should:

- Develop mechanisms for volunteers to claim out-of-pocket expenses;
 - Formally recognise that service providers that rely on volunteers explicitly require funds to support volunteer involvement, reimbursement and recognition and provide a specific and adequate budget allocation for this purpose in all funding agreements.
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