



A1 & A2: Informal Volunteering Symposium

The Story Project: Informal Volunteering in Faith-Based and Culturally Specific Sites

By: Heba Al Adawy (Policy Officer)
Volunteering Australia
heba@volunteeringaustralia.org

The Objectives

To showcase the diversity of volunteering by focusing on multicultural communities

- ❖ Volunteering as a nodal point that connects and establishes community in Australia

To capture a range of unrecognized and informal community activities that entail “time freely given for the common good”

- ❖ Volunteering as an activity that has multiple approaches, conceptualizations, motivations, and objectives.

Interpretive Approach

- ❖ Faith-based settings (mosques, churches, gurdwaras, temples)

- ❖ Cultural Clubs and Associations

- ❖ Broader Identity Based Sites – Parents’ Group; Women’s Group; Playgroup

- ❖ Interest based sites – Community gardens

Early Insights

- ❖ Informal volunteering is a means through which community is constituted, where the notion of 'community' is expansive rather than fixed or essentialist
- ❖ Even where evidence of vertical ties with the government (through a level of trust in their policies) remained imprecise, volunteering contributed to a sense of belonging with Australia by enabling the establishment of horizontal ties with different groups.
- ❖ Understandings of 'volunteering' could be culturally *specific* or *nuanced* (though not essentialist or exclusive to a culture)
- ❖ Volunteering could be invisibilised because the participants associate different terms and concepts with their activities

“An Act of Love”

“I would say it is an act of love. An act of shared love. We use that saying in our church as well.”

--Manjula - Founder of community produce “Pitta Garden” in Canberra and former President of Telugu Association of Canberra

“Swamchand Seva” (Pure Service)

“My definition of volunteering is that it is something that should not have any personal benefit attached to it. The closest word to volunteering in Telugu is “swamchand seva”. Pure service or pure willingness – without anything in return.” -- Srini, volunteer teacher at Telugu language school on Sundays

“God's Workforce”

“We are called the workforce because you 'work' for God. You don't volunteer for Him.”

But yes, when we organize bigger events and ask for more help from the community, we may call them 'volunteers' as that is more ad hoc.”

A Nigerian student and recent migrant; a member of the "workforce" of Deeper Life, an all-African Pentecostal Church in Canberra

On the Question of Recognition

What does recognition mean for my research participants?

How might we better recognize the domain and ecosystem of (informal) volunteering *on their terms*?

Recognition Through the Prism of 'Formal Volunteering'

Recognition of 'Volunteers' is Operationalized in the Government and Policy sector:

- **Individualistic terms (Volunteering Awards & Accolades) by State and Federal governments**
- **Incentivisation of Volunteering through emphasis on marketability**

Individual Recognition -> From Opposition to Ambivalence

“I always check myself and ask: why am I doing this? If ever a day came about that I feel I am doing this because I want to get in the media or I want to get on the front page of something, then I'm there for the wrong reasons.”

– Diana, a community activist, founder of Canberra Multicultural Forum, founder of Islamic Voice (radio)

'Our religion warns us to not be driven by what is called in Arabic, “Riyaa,” – which closely translates into showing off [ostentation]. To show off or to have a false pride. You work to please the Creator -- not to satisfy your nafs (ego/self).

- Mustapha, Imam, Canberra Islamic Centre

When asked whether he considered his volunteering is a pathway to employability, he laughed :
People don't even think about it in the context of employment at all. It's just “seva” [service].

Srini – Telugu Language teacher

"When I came to Australia, it was the first time I began to hear this: if you want to get a job, volunteer. Want to make friends? Volunteer. I would say it is a uniquely Australian or a foreign way of thinking."

-Viv, from Colombia, a volunteer at a church community garden

Ideational Recognition:

Affirmation of Collective Identity; Recognition of Socio-Political Concerns

“We were tired of people speaking on behalf of us.”

“We wanted to put our culture on display.”

“When I was in school, I had my hijab yanked off of me.”

“There were instances of discrimination. Being called a “curry.””

Recognition in Material Terms:

Provision of Space; Infrastructural and Relational Support

"The main challenge that all the associations face here in Canberra is lack of access to venues or the lack of venue [of proper size and function]."

"Nothing is free – only we, human beings, are free."

"There is fee everywhere" (re: School venues; Gungahlin College Theatre)

Conceptualising Intersectional Support: Volunteering Gradient

