

VOLUNTEERING AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL REVIEW OF THE DEFINITION OF VOLUNTEERING IN AUSTRALIA

ISSUES PAPER

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This paper has been written by a sub-committee of the National Steering Committee including in alphabetic order: Claire Ellis; Kirsten Holmes; Lisel O'Dwyer; Melanie Oppenheimer; Megan Paull; Courtney Webber (see Attachment A for affiliations).

Executive Summary

The current Volunteering Australia (VA) definition of volunteering has been in place since 1996 and may be too narrow for the breadth of volunteer practices undertaken in Australia today. A review of the definition is being conducted in two phases.

- Phase 1: The research and development of an Issues Paper which focuses on the issues, reasons, implications and opportunities around changing a definition.
- Phase 2: An Australia-wide consultation process that examines the issues in more depth enabling a recommendation on changing the definition.

The purpose of the Issues Paper is to encourage significant reflection and debate and provide stakeholders with an understanding of the dimensions of volunteering both here in Australia and globally.

Many of us would think that we know and can define what it means to volunteer in Australia in 2014. Complexities around the definition of volunteering soon emerge, however. Across Australia today - in academia, government, the non-profit sector and business sector - a number of different definitions of volunteering are in use.

This Issues Paper discusses the current VA definition of volunteering, global definitions of volunteering, global and cultural concepts of volunteering, language used in discussing volunteering and trends in volunteering. It also discusses the potential impact of changing the definition on volunteers and the sector and then distils this analysis to three alternate definitions for further consideration and debate by stakeholders during Phase 2 of the Review.

Current definition

The current VA definition of volunteering was developed in 1996 alongside a set of principles which 'clearly differentiate between volunteering and other unpaid activities' (Cordingley, 2000, p. 82).

The current definition does not account for areas like informal volunteering, which is known to be a significant way people give their time, or corporate volunteering. It also separates volunteering from other activities such as work experience, community service orders, student placements, unpaid work trials, emergency work during industrial disputes, work for the dole and caring for a family member.

Global definitions and concepts

Globally there are many definitions of volunteering and the concept of volunteering varies between cultures. Informal volunteering is typically more common amongst collectivist cultures, in Asia, Southern Europe, South America and Africa (Gronlund, 2013), whereas formal volunteering is more common among Anglo cultures and Northern European

countries. Given the multicultural nature of Australia today, any definition needs to have meaning to the different communities within which individuals volunteer.

Volunteering terminology

Terminology associated with volunteering reflects different ideas of what volunteering is. Rochester et al (2010) proposed three broad ways of thinking about volunteering globally. These are:

- Unpaid work or service - the dominant idea in Anglo countries
- Civil action - the dominant idea in Scandinavian countries and developing countries in the Global South
- Leisure - volunteering as a discretionary activity chosen to be undertaken in free time.

Trends in volunteering

Some of the trends currently having an impact on the sector include the increasing number of procedures and practices concerning volunteers and volunteering that have provided the sector with a raft of policies such as governance, risk management and workplace controls. Areas of recent growth in volunteering also need to be considered in a contemporary definition of volunteering, these include:

- Skilled volunteering
- Group volunteering
- Corporate volunteering
- Youth volunteering to gain hands-on work experience
- Volunteering through places of learning
- Spontaneous volunteering (e.g. in response to bushfires and floods)
- Virtual volunteering
- Episodic and micro-volunteering
- International and/or cross-national volunteering.

Impact

This Issues Paper also considers the impact of changing the definition. For example it could help:

- A wider variety of forms of volunteering be accepted and supported through better volunteer management practices
- Grow the understanding of the size and breadth of the volunteer community and its outputs and outcomes for society and Australia's economy, contributing to greater government and community recognition of the value of volunteering in society
- Provide greater support and recognition for volunteers currently not covered under the existing definition.

Other considerations include the impact on legislation and policy and the growth of social enterprise in Australia, and the lessening distinction between profit making and non-profit entities.

Potential dimensions for inclusion in a definition

This Issues Paper identifies the following as (potential) dimensions of a definition of volunteering:

- Benefit to the community
- No payment or financial reward
- Only un-paid work?
 - Should we include or exclude certain types of activities?
- Choice
- Structure of volunteering – only for a non-profit entity?
- Can entities volunteer or only individuals?

Recommended definitions for consultation

The National Steering Committee (membership listed in Attachment A) reviewed this paper and recommended the consultation phase focus on discussing three potential definitions:

- a. Volunteering is an activity undertaken as an individual or in a group, for the benefit of the community, without expectation of financial reward. Volunteering is a choice freely made by each individual and can include formal or informal community participation.
- b. Volunteering is doing something willingly, for no financial gain, that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives or the individual.
- c. We define volunteering as any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. Central to this definition is the fact that volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual. This can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation (from Volunteering England).

Developing a set of principles covering inclusions and exclusions around a definition was also recommended.