

Keynote Speech



Dr Justin Davis-Smith, CBE
Executive Director, Volunteering and Development
National Council for Voluntary Organizations (NCVO), England

Volunteering has come of age. Across the globe, Governments, businesses, voluntary groups, and citizens are waking up to the power of volunteering to build a stronger, fairer and more sustainable society.

As the limitation of the state and the market to deal with the entrenched challenges of the 21st century becomes ever more apparent, so interest in the role of voluntary associations and citizen action has become more pronounced.

The value of volunteering is becoming increasingly well documented: in its contribution to economic growth and a nation's GDP; in building social, cultural and human capital; and in giving a sense of value and purpose to individuals and communities threatened by the atomistic forces of modernization and development.

In both China and the UK in recent years the power of volunteering has been amply demonstrated by the successful delivery of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

These Games were among the most successful of the modern era and in both cases the contribution of volunteers was crucial to their success. In the UK the so-called GamesMakers have transformed public attitudes to volunteering and have started a debate on its role in modern society and what more needs to be done to nurture and strengthen its contribution.

**Hong Kong Institute of Volunteers
Inauguration Ceremony**
cum
Forum on Building Impact in Volunteering
2013.3.21

Key to this debate has been a discussion about the relationship between the state, private business and voluntary groups and how meaningful and mutually beneficial partnerships between the three can be developed to help take volunteering forward.

In this speech I will examine the challenges and opportunities for volunteering in our global community at the beginning of the 21st century, and the crucial role to be played by business and voluntary groups in harnessing this power.

I will cover three broad themes. First I will remind us of the contribution volunteers make to our societies. Second, I will examine recent developments in partnerships between businesses and volunteer-involving organizations and look at some of the on-going challenges to maximising these relationships. And third, I will draw some more general conclusions about the state of volunteering worldwide, and the steps required to ensure we can capitalise on this momentum, so that when historians look back at the first half of this century they will identify volunteering as one of the defining characteristics of the age.

First I wanted to remind us all (if we need reminding) of why volunteering is so important.

First it has a huge economic significance. In the UK where over 20 million people volunteer every year, giving more than 100 million hours of service every week, it has been estimated that the economic value of this activity is worth in excess of £40 billion to our GDP, making it one of the largest 'industries' in the UK.

But volunteering is so much more than crude economics.

Put simply our communities would cease to function without the input of volunteers. I have often thought that one way of bringing home to politicians the real value of volunteering would be to organise a national day of action where volunteers withdrew their labour for 24 hours. The impact would be overwhelming – across health and social welfare, criminal justice, sport and recreation, the environment, culture and heritage. The services we take for granted would grind to a halt. And there would certainly have been no Olympic and Paralympic Games last year in London or in Beijing.

But volunteering has an even greater value than ensuring our essential community services function. It makes a crucial contribution to binding our communities together, to building social capital and trust between individuals and helping to make our communities better places to live and work. Surveys have suggested that people who volunteer know more people in their neighbourhood and think of their home as a better place to live.

And finally, as if we needed even more evidence of the value of volunteering, volunteering is good for the volunteer themselves. This reciprocity – with both the giver and receiver benefitting – lies at the heart of the volunteer experience and is what makes it so special.

Volunteering is good for one's physical and mental well-being. It can help with the development of new skills and enhance employability. And it can contribute to a general sense of happiness and well-being. One of my favourite studies from a few years back found that volunteering was the second greatest source of joy - behind dancing!

So volunteering matters - perhaps more than ever.

But we mustn't be complacent. Challenges remain which unless addressed will hamper the forward march of volunteering.

There are challenges of identity and appeal, of access and diversity, of moving with the times but fiercely defending the core values of volunteering as an activity freely undertaken and not for financial reward.

There is a challenge to government about when to get involved and when to get out of the way. We have to acknowledge that our understanding of what governments can most usefully do is far from complete; we need more research on the ways in which people respond to social situations and to the mechanisms which government can deploy.

But we know through our experience over the years that we need the practical support of governments in investing finances in the infrastructures and organisations which provide information and access to volunteering opportunities.

But while citizens are likely to get more involved, we must be clear what volunteering is and what role it has to play. Volunteers are not there to replace the role of the state, volunteers add value, they complement state services; they enhance government delivery by working alongside paid professionals.

Then there are challenges to building partnerships between the business sector and volunteer-involving organisations which is one of the main themes of this conference.

The private, for-profit sector also has an important role to play in building sustainable societies and unleashing the power of citizens.

Workplace volunteering programmes, where employers support their staff to volunteer, by offering time-off work to get involved in the community, have become common place throughout much of the world and are beginning to redefine relations between staff, employers and the local community.

The benefits of such initiatives are clear cut. The community benefits through an injection of time and talents; staff reap the rewards of personal development and the opportunity to serve; and the company benefits through a more motivated and energised workforce and better public relations.

Such programmes, however, are not without their challenge. Some have focused too much on the 'team challenge' model, characterised by painting school walls or cleaning up parks –not activities without value, but perhaps of less significance than those schemes which have set out to harness the skills and experiences of paid staff to meet the needs of the local community.

However, we need to be sensitive to the fact that some employees will see volunteering as an opportunity to have a break from their paid work and to try something different.

And we should remember that when, let's say, a finance officer gets away from their desk and PC, sometimes the last thing she or he wants to do is advise a charity on financial management or be co-opted as the treasurer of a community group.

Sometimes you just want a chance to try something different.volunteering gives you a way of trying something new.

That too can be another **win** for organisational development. What looks like fun can still pose a serious challenge and develop team skills and confidence.

And for some there is a danger that corporate support will edge all too close to compulsion – with progression in one's career dependent on the willingness (and ability) of an individual to volunteer in support of the company's chosen project.

There is also the question of resources. Many companies see their contribution being about releasing their staff into the community and do not recognise that finding suitable opportunities and managing these volunteering placements requires investment. We need to challenge the idea that volunteering is free. Excellent value, yes. But free, no. And corporate

need to recognise that good volunteering programmes need resourcing.

But where they work well, where they build on the skills and interests of staff, and where they are properly resourced, such corporate volunteering programmes have the capacity to be transformational.

Microvolunteering – new technology, widening the range

One of the striking features of the present landscape for volunteering is the role that digital technology is increasingly playing in the development of new kinds of volunteering opportunities.

For instance, smartphones and tablets are offering new ways of getting involved.

My colleagues in NCVO research team and in the Institute for Volunteering Research are currently exploring this field of “**microvolunteering**”.

First of all they are exploring what people are talking about when they use the term **microvolunteering** ... and the opportunities this new field presents.

We can see that new apps for your smartphone are enabling organisations to call on small snippets of your time, perhaps to send in a picture of an environmental problem, an un-mended hole in the road, a local eyesore, a site that has scope for regeneration.

Smartphone apps can ask us to respond to a survey collecting views across the population on our reactions to social problems Or to give a few minutes to helping translate a document needed by a local group.

The technology is making it ever easier for people to participate in volunteering opportunities, however small in time, and wherever they are ... on the bus, out shopping, relaxing on the sofa.

And also in the office. Online micro-volunteering can be supported by employers as a way for employees who have little spare time to contribute their skills to causes and charities when they have a few minutes spare during the working day.

Micro-volunteering gives us a way to address some of the main barriers to people's engagement in volunteering, such as lack of time or not being in the right place at the right time in terms of some voluntary contribution to the community.

The new technologies are creating these opportunities – and challenges – not just in the range of activities that we can undertake but in the ways we can manage volunteers and volunteering.

The technology now provides us with the means of managing all the different availabilities of time - the snippets of time - people can offer. People say they can volunteer for an hour here and an hour there (or whatever). The technology provides the process for them to make all their various offers of time, and it enables the volunteer manager to organise them so as to meet the needs of the service they are providing for their clients and beneficiaries.

Also, through Twitter and other social media we have gained great power in calling people together for voluntary action in our communities. You could recruit a workforce of volunteers to help clear up a park or a waste-ground or to help run an event.

But our research tells us - micro-volunteering should not be seen in isolation. It is part of expanding the volunteering offer. Our research does not suggest that it is replacing other, perhaps more 'traditional', forms of volunteering.

Going wider than microvolunteering though, the developing technologies are helping us improve the data-bases and information systems which enable people to find the volunteering opportunities that are right for them.

Micro volunteering gets to the heart of one of the major challenges facing the volunteering movement - how we as a movement can bring ourselves into line with some of the fundamental shifts taking place in society to do with issues of ownership and control. Without wanting to overstate things I think some of the shifts taking place in society are so profound that they will revolutionize the way in which people chose to get involved in volunteering in the future. And unless we adapt our thinking and processes accordingly we will be left behind.

It's to do with the Spirit of the Age, with people wanting to take more control over their lives, be it at the workplace or in their free time. Academics have a phrase for it – co-production or co-ownership. People are no longer willing to simply work for, or volunteer, in predetermined

opportunities, but want to actively shape the agenda themselves.

We can see it everywhere, from patient participation in the health service through to the rise of the phenomenon of citizen journalism, where blogs and web diaries have begun to replace more traditional print and broadcast media as the news source of choice for many. Often the first reports out of war-zones or trouble spots are from such citizen journalists.

Charles Leadbetter has written of this trend – under the title *We Think*. The book itself was a product of co-production having been jointly written and contributed to by dozens of people

via the Net. Leadbetter argues that unless organisations wake up to this shift in control and power that co-production entails they will lose their relevance. I think the same is true for volunteering.

What does this mean for our movement? It means we need to put volunteers at the forefront of our thinking. We need to engage volunteers more in the design of their opportunities – co-production – not simply give them tasks to do. We need to make our organisations more like social movements than tight knit bureaucracies.

So we need to open our doors to our volunteers whatever sector they are in to allow them to shape our movement.

My big challenge to you today is how as business, as government, as voluntary groups we can embrace this challenge of co-production to ensure that volunteers have the opportunity to re-shape the activities they are involved in. If we can rise to this challenge then volunteering has the capacity to be one of the defining characteristics of our age.

The personal aspect

Above all, as we reflect on the range of possibilities which volunteering offers us, we shouldn't forget that most volunteering is in its nature personal and about the connection made between one individual and others.

Even, as today, we focus on the development of skills and the capacity of organisations, we recognise that at heart what we're talking about is supporting each other as fellow members of our society and caring for each other.

We know from research that about 2/3 of volunteers say the reason they volunteer is because someone asked them. Volunteering is founded on people and their networks of friendships and the causes and interests they care about and share.

Recognising that central aspect of caring for each other, we can pause to reflect how much greater the role volunteering can have in our lives and in our society.

That particularly strikes me when I hear the reports about, say, a hospital or a care home where staff seem to have lost compassion in caring for patients – maybe, that's under pressure of meeting targets with reduced resources, or, maybe, it's out of some motivation we can hardly guess at - and I ask myself how much better those services might have been if they'd involved volunteers in larger and more effective ways.

We know through experience and research that volunteers can give a quality of time which can complement the work of the paid staff. Volunteers can help improve the care given to a patient or service-user, sometimes because they share some of the same experience ...or sometimes just because they have time to sit and chat.

More than that, we can see how involving volunteers can open up what are sometimes closed institutions to the life and scrutiny of the local community.

But also we know it can be by volunteering themselves that older people can stay healthy and independent.

Perhaps it's stretching research findings to claim that “**Volunteers Live Longer**” ... but it's worth trying!

But what we do know is that volunteers make a difference. The great social anthropologist Margaret Mead once wrote:

'Never doubt the capacity of a group of committed individuals to change the world. In the end they are the only ones who can'.

Thank you.