

# What's Different about How Volunteers Work? Relationship Building for Wellbeing and Change

Jody Aked

---

**Abstract** This article looks at what happens when volunteering goes well. It provides a theoretical and empirical grounding for understanding how volunteers enable outcomes such as participation and cooperation in complex change environments. The findings point to three important qualities of volunteer relationships, which alter how people feel about themselves, others and their situation: informality, the act of doing together and networked reciprocity. When these relational styles foster three psychosocial experiences known to support human wellbeing – relatedness, competency and autonomy – they make it possible for marginalised and poor groups to participate, initiate and share ownership in the change process. When socially as well as personally rewarding, volunteer relationships can also strengthen solidarity, a knowledge of other's strengths and social commitment, strengthening the basis for social action to continue as a cooperative process with other people. Implications for how volunteering is utilised and strengthened as a strategy for community development are discussed.

---

## 1 Introduction

Volunteering is thought to be an indicator of a healthy social fabric, often linked to the social capital of a place or community (Putnam 2000). The time, energy, wisdom, experience, knowledge and skills that people give to help one another is an emergent property of social relationships and community life (Halpern 2010), which support human wellbeing (Helliwell and Putnam 2006; Helliwell 2012). But volunteering is also used as a specific strategy for improving people's lives. The main focus of this article is the formal and intensive forms of volunteering organised by non-governmental agencies or governmental bodies to put international, national or local citizens to work on projects aimed at reducing poverty, inequality and insecurity. Through encouraging people to 'do with and for others' volunteering interventions make social linkages and pro-social behaviour a central part of adaptation and progress. It is a development that feels more human (Lewis 2006) in a landscape dominated by technocratic approaches (Devereux and McGregor 2014) and technical fixes (Moore 2015).

However, for a system designed to bring people working to see a fairer world together with those enduring the burden of our unfair world, it is striking

how often volunteers misconstrue the realities of people living in poverty and vice versa. The Valuing Volunteering research project found plenty of examples where volunteering falls short of addressing the root causes of poverty (Burns *et al.* 2015). From volunteers who scream in frustration 'why don't they want our help?' to bewildered indigenous tribes who admit 'we asked for labour to build a road to market. We were given 22 goats. The request was answered, but with goats', confusion about what needs to be achieved and what volunteers can feasibly enable is abundant. For example, the good intentions of volunteers can be overwhelmed by national development programmes and local governance structures that increase instability and hinder meaningful participation among marginalised groups (Aked 2014a).

Even where volunteering does make significant improvements to the lives of individuals and communities, the volunteering for development sector struggles to articulate the contribution of volunteering to change processes, curbing investment and improvement. Programmes report what has changed in areas of health, education or environmental sustainability, but fail to articulate the specifics about how volunteering was able to facilitate those changes. Without understanding why volunteering works

when it does, programmes cannot reliably foster the processes that translate the placement of volunteers into real impact. In 2013, a report on the value of international volunteering summarised that:

In the immediate future, metrics and indicators employed to assess the value of volunteers must include more interpersonal, relational and process-oriented concepts, and must link these processes to development outcomes (Lough and Matthew 2013: 26).

In response, this article draws together findings from the Valuing Volunteering research to examine what happens when volunteering goes well. It is about the contribution of volunteering to human development and progress. It begins with volunteer relationships. It focuses on some of the more intangible human capacities crucial to emancipatory social change, but also the most difficult to identify and develop (Oswald and Clarke 2010). When volunteers form relationships in communities, how are people living in poverty – and associated actors in the system – positively affected? Which interpersonal processes explain how volunteer interventions achieve outcomes such as ownership, participation and empowerment? Are these change pathways unique to volunteering?

Data is examined using self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), which suggests that feelings of relatedness, autonomy and competence are important psychosocial experiences which furnish people with the initiative, motivation and capacities to shape their environments for the better. The article introduces a framework to explain how volunteers affect positive social change through their relationships. It goes on to look at evidence for some of the key linkages in the framework and discusses implications for the way we organise volunteer opportunities and approach development more generally.

## 2 Humanising development

In March this year, anthropologist Henrietta Moore was the latest to add her voice to a chorus of dissent about the primacy given to technical fixes in development interventions designed to make a tangible difference to people's lives:

Technical fixes like irrigation systems are rarely the whole answer. This is something we have known for a very long time... But we persist with the idea that technology will solve complex social problems... Technology matters but when development projects succeed they succeed because of the intricacies of social innovation (Moore 2015).

When development is reframed as a 'collective action problem' (Booth 2012) requiring the human-centred design of solutions (IDEO 2009), the relational sphere becomes a central part of the change process. Human welfare and progress is as much about social relationships as service delivery (Bailey 2006) or provision of material need (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009). When it comes to changing things for the better, transformational outcomes are contingent on skilful social behaviours such as cooperation (Sennett 2012). Social relations structure the social action people take, influencing and constraining what they experience, the decisions they make and how they behave (Rowson, Broome and Jones 2010).

In 2013, the World Bank Institute's programme to teach the next generation of leaders emphasised the need for new actors in the development landscape who can 'become catalysts for change by creating and sustaining coalitions often critical for moving development programs forward' (World Bank Institute 2013). If the future of development is going to combine technological advances with a focus on the relational processes that make complementary social innovation possible, then where does volunteering – and the relationships volunteers make – fit in?

## 3 Self-determination theory of wellbeing

This article uses concepts found in wellbeing theory to examine volunteer relationships and the interpersonal processes that seem to influence the change trajectory of volunteering for development interventions.

Interested in the 'quality of people's experiences', wellbeing has been conceptualised as a complex, dynamic process blending optimal psychological and social functioning with emotions (NEF 2011). Shaped by the interplay between people's circumstances and the resources they bring to situations, the experience of wellbeing changes how people behave. Whereas negative emotions elicit 'fight' or 'flight' responses, positive experiences encourage exploratory behaviour. They broaden people's scope of awareness, encouraging them to investigate, interact and identify opportunities, which over time influences how creative, connected and effective they are at shaping their environments (Fredrickson and Branigan 2005). Fleeting positive feelings can have cumulative effects on people's quality of life. For example, moment-to-moment positive emotions have been shown to have stable influences on individuals' resilience, which they

can draw on in moments of change (Fredrickson, Tugade and Waugh 2003).

The emergence of wellbeing is dependent upon certain qualities of psychosocial experience (Ryan and Deci 2000; Molix and Nichols 2013) which move people to act. As a broad framework for the study of human motivation, self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000) indicates that there are three qualities of experience that people find intrinsically rewarding across cultures:

- feeling a closeness and psychological connectedness to others (relatedness);
- feeling free from external control or pressure to be self-directed (autonomy); and
- feeling able to master challenges and influence circumstances (competency).

In the wellbeing system, subjective experiences of relatedness, autonomy and competency provide feedback to people that things are going well. These experiences have been used to understand volunteer motivation (Oostlander *et al.* 2013; Bidee *et al.* 2012; Haivas, Hofmans and Pepermans 2012) and performance (Millette and Gagné 2008). Studies are beginning to consider the sorts of work contexts (Gagné and Deci 2005) and relational styles (Simões and Alarcão 2014) that enhance these psychosocial experiences but their analysis of impact is restricted to what changes for the individual (i.e. the volunteer).

We have evidence that volunteering is personally rewarding to the volunteer. Few, if any, studies have examined whether relatedness, autonomy and competency move people to act and interact with one another. Do volunteers encourage positive psychosocial experiences in those they interact with? Does interpersonal wellbeing contribute to change by facilitating effective social action?

#### **4 Exploring volunteer relationships as part of Valuing Volunteering**

Researchers on the Valuing Volunteering project collected data between 2012 and 2014 in four countries: Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal and the Philippines. The importance of relationships to the way volunteers affect change was apparent in an early workshop in the research process, which brought all the researchers together in July 2012 to discuss emerging findings. The finding that volunteers work *through* relationships prompted a set of inquiries exploring the salient features of relationships that enable change.

The conceptual underpinnings of this article were developed by the author as part of a PhD inquiry into wellbeing and social change in the Philippines. Through an open inquiry process research questions and methods were iteratively developed to explore issues that held promise for exploring how wellbeing experiences affect change trajectories. This article is an opportunity to report some of the early findings and use the same framework (self-determination theory) to examine data from other country case studies. Insights mainly derive from three inquiries:

- A year-long participatory systemic inquiry and action research process in the Philippines focused on the role of social linkages and interactions between volunteers, people living in poverty and local power holders to understand natural resource governance. Storytelling, participatory social network mapping and group sessions were used to facilitate volunteer reflections, community level insights about their experiences interacting with volunteers and group-based analysis sessions.
- Two systemic action research inquiries exploring how volunteering contributes to improving quality and access of education in the Terai and hill regions of Nepal. Methods include stakeholder mapping, visual methods, interviews, and an action research process over 18 months and eight months respectively.
- Training of local volunteers in participatory methods to steer a research process in Korogocho, an informal settlement located in northeast Nairobi, Kenya. Over 1,000 hours of community fieldwork comprised workshops and interviews with members of the community to reflect critically on development challenges and devise locally rooted solutions.

The inquiries looked at a range of volunteering, including organised volunteering bringing outsiders (e.g. national or international volunteers) into communities, community-led volunteering and informal forms of mutual aid and self-help. The focus of this article is on the organisation of volunteering as a development intervention as opposed to more emergent forms of exchange (e.g. mutual aid). It is mostly concerned, therefore, with interactions between outsider volunteers and people living in poverty but insights from community-led volunteering (e.g. lending groups) are included where relevant.

## 5 A framework describing how volunteering works

Volunteering interventions perceive development as a human activity, needing people from different cultures and experience sets to work together on difficult problems – for example, uptake of health services or the development of livelihoods. For instance, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) positions its role as a development agency as ‘bringing people together to fight poverty’, maintaining that ‘volunteering provides the means through which the essential pre-conditions for systemic and sustainable change – ownership, participation, empowerment and inclusion – can be realised’ (VSO 2014: 2). This sounds simple enough but, as with any human process, the practice of positively affecting people’s lives with the placement of volunteers is messy and less predictable.

On the one hand, there are cases where the placement of volunteers has galvanised energy among people living in poverty, encouraging people to take part and become active in their own development (Aked 2014b). On the other hand, the Valuing Volunteering inquiries repeatedly demonstrated that the role of volunteering agencies to mobilise actors with different experiences and worldviews into the same space is not enough to achieve sustainable transformations to peoples’ lives (Burns *et al.* 2015). This is partially because participation, empowerment and ownership are not automatic by-products of volunteering. For example, the positioning of international volunteers as ‘experts’ in Nepal disempowered people with important local knowledge. In Kenya, precluding people living in the Korogocho neighbourhood a role in how development programmes are designed and evaluated reduces people’s enthusiasm to take part.

So, why these differing outcomes? And how can the volunteering for development sector ensure volunteering reliably facilitates positive change? It was during an early analysis session of the Valuing Volunteering research that it became obvious to researchers that social relations were going to be central to answering our question about the kind of change volunteering facilitates. However, the volunteering for development sector lacks a coherent interpretation of the relational processes that link the placement of a volunteer to effective social action (Lough and Matthew 2013).

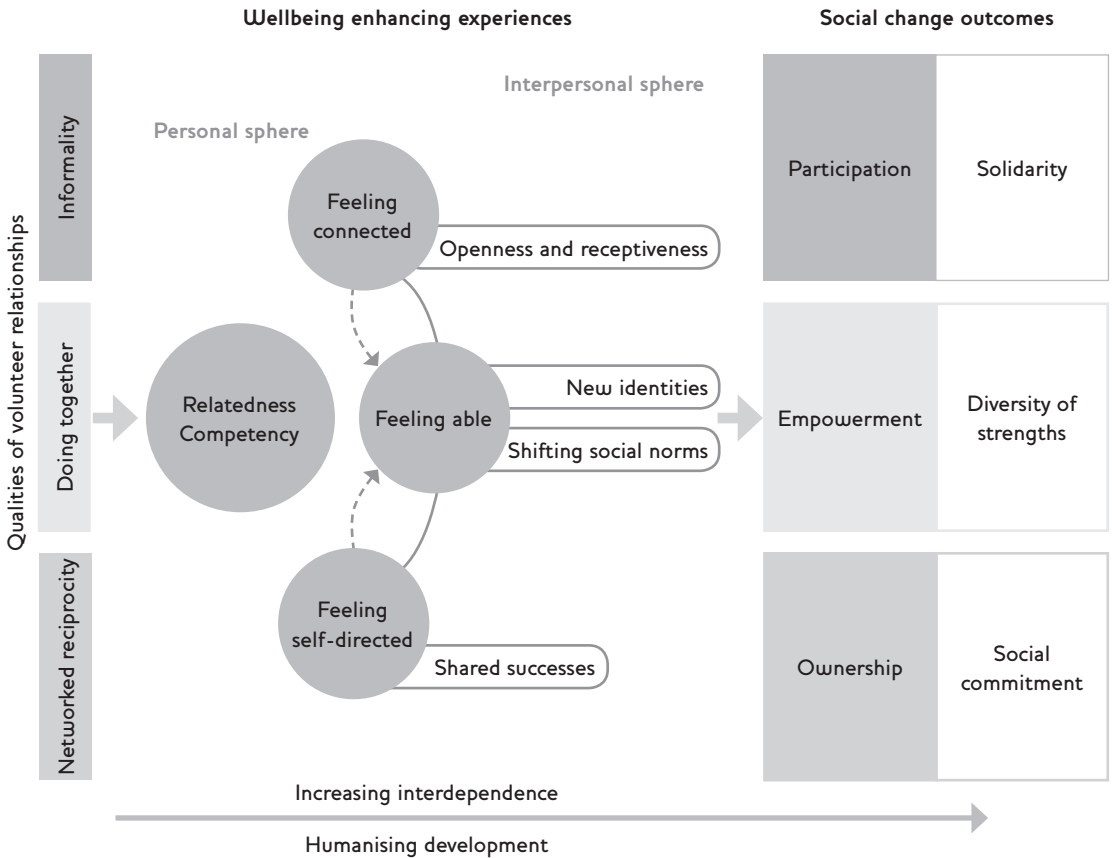
Figure 1 introduces a framework for thinking about how volunteer relationships affect development and social change, when it works. The learning

from the Valuing Volunteering project points to three important qualities of volunteer relationships, which alter how people feel about themselves, the people around them and their situation. Volunteer relationships built on informality, the act of doing together and networked reciprocity trigger wellbeing-enhancing experiences which support individual actors to do well and actors to do well together. In answering a question such as ‘what has to happen before a marginalised actor is able to participate?’ or ‘how do volunteers get people to effectively collaborate with them and others?’, the data point to three important pathways evidenced in the article:

- The informality of volunteer relationships encourages feelings of trust and unity. The psychosocial experience of relatedness affects how open and receptive people are to volunteers, increasing participation in the change process. When this participation is the by-product of people’s relationships and friendships, it is socially meaningful. Individual motivations for engaging can take on a social dimension through feelings of solidarity.
- The way volunteers build relationships through doing with others can distribute responsibilities for change. Through mobilising people in poverty to act alongside them, volunteers can support people they work with to experience a sense of competence. When new competencies are realised in social connection with others they are more visible to actors in the system, creating new identities and shifting social norms about who is capable of what. The change process is sustained by a diversity of strengths rather than contingent on the capabilities of a few.
- Volunteer relationships develop in a network of actors exchanging time, skill and energy. This networked reciprocity is a good quality for encouraging actors to be self-directed in their interactions and collective action with one another. When the psychosocial experience of autonomy emerges from a team effort where successes are shared, a sense of achievement and the ownership this brings is bound by social commitments to others.

There are some important feedbacks (grey arrows on Figure 1) between relatedness, competency and autonomy, which can have cumulative effects on participation, empowerment and ownership. For example, trust between volunteers and the people they work with changes how people feel about

Figure 1 A framework mapping qualities of volunteer relationships to social change outcomes



Source Author's own.

themselves. This can be a precursor to participation or trying something new. A sense of autonomy protects people to feel competent, even in exchanges where they are on the receiving end of advice, because they identify the need for this knowledge themselves. So when they learn, they do so because it is important and of value to them. They have a stake in the outcome of this learning and what it achieves.

From a social change perspective it is important that volunteer relationships enable people to feel a sense of relatedness, competency and autonomy because these psychosocial experiences make human connectivity both individually rewarding and socially meaningful. Working through a concrete example, a sense of competency explains how volunteers are able to capacity build and empower. A volunteer is the first to believe a young person has something important to contribute to development. As the volunteer becomes familiar to the young person, they take up the opportunity to practise at change with the volunteer. They begin to trust in themselves. As their individual

identity changes – from bystander to contributor or from beneficiary to leader – social expectations about their capabilities follow suit. New expectations come with new responsibilities, providing further opportunity to shape a more favourable social context that recognises their strengths, and so on.

The framework suggests that improvements to personal and interpersonal wellbeing which derive from volunteer relationships may add particular value to social change efforts. They make perceptible to the actors involved the complex interdependence between personal motivations and collective capacities or between collective goals and individual strengths needed for effective collaboration. Participation, empowerment and ownership outcomes for the individual become socially relevant through attendant feelings of solidarity, knowledge about others' strengths and social commitment to do well with others. These complementary changes in the interpersonal sphere increase the probability that individuals will use new-found capacities in pro-social ways.

The following sections provide insights and examples from the Valuing Volunteering research to explain how the framework links qualities of volunteer relationship to psychosocial experiences and the social change outcomes that follow.

## **6 Informality, relatedness and participation**

Volunteering is often used as a tool to increase participation among poor, marginalised or excluded groups to redress chronic detachment from decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. The Valuing Volunteering inquiries were replete with examples of volunteers struggling to maintain enthusiasm and involvement among local actors in change processes that are uncertain or where power imbalances are debilitating. The collaboration required of people in these contexts is helped by a psychological connectedness, often expressed by people living in poverty as feelings of 'trust' or 'unity'. The informality of volunteer relationships help to foster these feelings, making participation rewarding and socially meaningful.

### **6.1 An emotional connection**

Studying how people living in poverty experience their interactions with volunteers revealed how much easier people find participation with those they relate to. In the Philippines, the culture of *bayanihan*<sup>1</sup> makes it easy to mobilise people from different communities in emergency situations, but the longer-term collaboration needed 'to build back better' remains a challenge: it requires people to navigate differences of opinion without going their separate ways (Aked 2014a). In the Korogocho neighbourhood of Nairobi, feelings of closeness are compromised by confusion and distortion at the national level about what it means to volunteer. This means that even where high levels of trust encourage community-level volunteering, transactions of help and support take place in fairly closed networks, organised according to people's ethnic identity. This limits how effective community-level volunteering can be at promoting wider social harmony and change.

When looking at international and national volunteering we found change to be stubbornly slow in instances where people living in poverty reported that 'we don't feel close to them [referring to outside help/volunteers]'. These findings echo the findings of sociological and psychological research which say that change is difficult when people are interacting with those they perceive to have different worldviews from themselves (Sennett 2012; Fiske 2008; Hoffman 2011). Emotions get in the way, regulating how we identify and interact with one another. When

volunteers change things for the better, somewhere along the way they have usually proactively sought a positive foundation from which to build meaningful relationships with people living in poverty.

### **6.2 The importance of the informal**

In the Philippines national and international volunteers on the International Citizen Service<sup>2</sup> reflected that when shared experiences with people living in poverty are positive they build a social memory that feeds bigger cycles of trust, so 'the legacy can be used both by volunteers and people in the community in the form of new relationships' (national volunteer).<sup>3</sup> Many of these shared experiences take place in the informal arena. It is through being part of local life that volunteers get invited to birthdays and local festivals. Some go to church. Some plant trees. Some go swimming with local fishermen to check on the health of the coral reef. As one international volunteer reflected, 'I noticed that my connections were initially emotional rather than business. They became friends and they helped with work later on, by linking me, etc. Over time they became business connections'.<sup>4</sup>

Friendship was described by volunteers as a vehicle for change, making social activities such as going to dinner really matter. Personal relationships are very rewarding and motivating. The research collected examples where volunteers' friends help out, improving the effectiveness of project activities and interventions. For example, we found that one of the volunteers' 'trusted' motorbike drivers decided on his own accord to accompany volunteers into schools to translate awareness-raising seminars delivered in English for the children, 'Otherwise just the teachers understand' (motorbike driver).<sup>5</sup>

Allowing trust and helping behaviours to emerge organically mimics how many self-help groups form. In Korogocho, self-help groups called Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILC) come into being where enough trust exists between loose groups of people who are confident in the ability and honesty of fellow members.

Informal interactions were seen by international and national volunteers on the International Citizen Service to 'blur the line of professionalism and personalism [*sic*]' which helped them to affect the perspective of powerful and powerless actors. So, a sense of relatedness did not just catalyse participation, it enabled volunteers to influence people. For example, national and international volunteers in the Philippines used their interactions in

informal spaces to build commitment from mayors to work on environmental issues. In Nepal the presence of a female volunteer living in the community caused reflection for this local teacher about the position of women in society: 'The thinking changes. Someone from another country is here and she is living alone. You think, if you are well educated you can go anywhere. Why does our culture stop daughters from being free to do things?' This change in attitude is not the consequence of a formal (e.g. work-based) interaction. It comes from seeing a volunteer living in the community in a different way. It is a by-product of volunteers' informality and increasing familiarity with local people.

The finding that volunteers' personal (e.g. non-work) connections improve how they impact development is supported by other research that has sought a relational understanding of social learning and adaptive capacity (Pelling *et al.* 2008). Creating the space within and between local organisations for individuals to develop private as well as official relationships was found to strengthen adaptation efforts. The informal nature of these interactions taking place in the 'shadows' helped to make the implementation of new ideas and systems in work settings more effective. The study found it takes time to build social interactions into 'productive networks of exchange'. It is not an outcome that easily emerges within tightly-defined project parameters or task-oriented initiatives. By contrast, volunteering interventions commit resources (e.g. host homes, support staff) to embed volunteers in local life, which has the effect of prioritising the relational processes that can help make change happen.

### **6.3 Improving the social impact of participation**

When the presence of a volunteer is an intensive and consistent one, the volunteer becomes a familiar and trusted resource for local actors working to fight poverty. In the Philippines members of a community-based forest management area sought advice from a diaspora volunteer on the benefits to their members of a land deal with a Chinese investor, which government officials were supporting under the guise of a public-private partnership. Out of all the actors in play, it was the volunteer who was perceived as trustworthy and committed to the same aims. The support was practical but also emotional because 'what we feel, it becomes lighter because of the concern we experience' (community member). In the Nepali education inquiry, the trust between volunteers and local actors led to an increase in teachers' confidence and their own sense of agency in the change process. In the Philippines, shared activities

between volunteers and local young people made it possible for the young people to learn what they were capable of. Over time this began to shift perspectives among adults about the role of young people in change efforts from being 'recipients of change' to 'vehicles for change' (local government officer).

So, as trust builds between volunteers and people living in poverty, this sense of relatedness releases energy into change processes both by increasing participation and by making the participation of marginalised actors socially meaningful. This is not to say every volunteer is able to form an emotional bond with people living in poverty or that every development worker fails to do so. But the nature of giving something of yourself to something bigger than yourself is powerful. It is usually an indication that a person has sought to understand another's experience. People respond positively to displays of pro-social behaviour motivated by empathetic concern. For example, social network studies have found that the act of contributing to a group project is socially contagious (Fowler and Christakis 2010). When people who are not part of the initial interaction learn about this contribution it influences their future behaviour to be more outward-looking. The researchers conclude that each contribution to the public good is tripled by other people who see or hear about it and are spurred to act.

Some of this behaviour has a neurological basis. Research has found reward centres of the brain are stimulated during acts of cooperation with others, making helping an activity with mood-enhancing and motivational effects (for review see Huppert 2008). In psychological studies these positive emotions have been found to have a subtle but important influence on behaviour (Fredrickson 1998). They broaden our scope of awareness, encouraging us to explore, to play, and to make connections with others. As an example, people are more likely to be open and curious about cultural difference when in a positive mood, buffering against the tendency to stereotype and define our relationships by how we differ rather than what we share (Isen and Daubman 1984; Fredrickson and Branigan 2005; Johnson and Fredrickson 2005). In shared moments of positive emotion we are more likely to think in terms of 'we' rather than 'me versus you' (Fredrickson 2012). Together, these varied studies suggest that acts of volunteering create social value through encouraging a certain kind of participation, more likely to be characterised by a 'fellow feeling' or solidarity than personal incentive. This sense of relatedness can spur how able, effective and legitimate people feel

tackling injustices (e.g., misuse of power; public accountability of decision-making bodies). If linked to targeted efforts to shift systems in favour of the poorest, volunteers – and the sense of relatedness they propagate – may serve as an important source of strength for marginalised actors to assume more meaningful roles in transformational change processes.

## **7 Doing together, competence and empowerment**

It is often said that volunteering empowers people living in poverty. The idea is that through the provision of a volunteer, marginalised groups gain new knowledge about their rights or disadvantaged groups develop new skills to influence development. Wellbeing theory says that new competencies cannot be given to people. They have to be ‘felt’ and ‘experienced’ before anyone is empowered to take further action. It is only through people’s proactive engagement with one another and the world around them that they begin to understand what they are capable of. Volunteer relationships that are characterised by ‘doing together’ create safe interpersonal spaces for people to practise at making change happen.

### **7.1 Responsibilities for feeling response-able**

The competency people experience in their dealings with power holders can determine whether they bother or not. Young people in the Philippines disengaged with change efforts because they were ‘bored’ or ‘lazy to’. In unpicking what was meant by these turns of phrase, the research found that they did not have the self-confidence or collective confidence to navigate interactions with people in positions of influence. A follow-up action research session with the same young people developed a prototype to improve the impact of volunteering locally. They were interested in learning techniques for how to approach and relate to adults in positions of authority, identifying that national and international volunteers could help them to do this.

The research found that having a specific task to do as part of a wider change effort makes an actor or group of actors feel important and accountable. A local youth leader in the Philippines describes how it felt when national and international volunteers trusted in her to mobilise young people to take action on the environment: ‘In the first place, I feel “ooh”. The confidence is there but I don’t know what to do. I cannot visualise myself being the responsible one’.<sup>6</sup> This finding is supported by the author’s previous work on a participation project with marginalised young people in Brazil (Aked 2012). Improvements in trust and confidence that

derived from experiencing positive relations and feeling able with others had to take place before the young people could conceive of translating their ideas for change into tangible projects.

Nurturing individual responsibilities as part of a wider group effort strengthens actors’ sense of mastery. As an international volunteer noted when reviewing their relationships with people living in poverty, ‘The doing role feels more of a contribution... it feels like the success is down to you.’ This psychosocial experience is personally energising but it also has social consequences. When attempts to make a difference go well, the successes get attributed to the people most involved. A national volunteer reflected: ‘If someone is a heavy contributor you trust in them more because you see what they can do.’

Responsibilities begin to change how people view themselves and how they are viewed by others. A study of the outcomes of national and international volunteer relationships in the Philippines observed how local young people grow from being quiet, shy and unsure of themselves into individuals who are self-assured and moving with purpose. The important thing from the perspective of enabling change is that these new-found capacities are not fleeting. By the end of a three-month volunteering programme they are grounded in a personal bank of experiences and relationships that the young people can use in future situations.

### **7.2 Volunteering as a safe space**

The fact that volunteering interventions are typically constructed around opportunities ‘to do with others’ is important, considering that ten years of research into citizenship concluded that citizen participation in development is learned through action (Citizenship DRC 2011). And yet improving empowerment through distributing responsibilities to marginalised actors from the very beginning of a project or intervention is a demanding form of participation, especially when confidence is low.

The way volunteers interact with marginalised groups can make it possible for people to take on new responsibilities. A sense of relatedness between volunteers and local actors is important for creating a safe interpersonal space for learning. In Nepal, trusted volunteers became mentors to local teachers. The teachers felt supported to try new things out without worrying if they didn’t work. Their interaction with the volunteers created the opportunity in their day-to-day work to reflect on their practice. This finding suggests that there



is an important relationship between feelings of relatedness and competence. Trusting relationships between volunteers and local actors help people to feel supported to try new things. Interestingly, the presence of an international volunteer afforded the teachers a new kind of power, which comes from being valued. It legitimised their work, sending a message to all actors in the system about the importance of their role. This was an important social outcome in a country context where early child development facilitators are typically afforded a lower status in the education system.

However, the provision of legitimate roles and responsibilities to those who would not normally have a stake in social change does not automatically translate into results. In the Philippines, mobilising people to volunteer in their communities (e.g. disaster response, health provision) is relatively easy, but it is not equivalent to empowerment (Aked 2014a). The coming together of people does not make their collective effort impactful unless volunteering is directed at the root causes of social injustice and used to proactively encourage capacities (e.g. critical engagement, cooperation, management of conflict) among marginalised groups to steward social and environmental change (Aked 2014b).

This qualification is not to detract from the simple finding that a sense of competency in all these capacities takes time and practice to develop. The incentive to master them is contingent upon very human considerations: how people feel about themselves and those around them. Empowerment aims cannot be achieved without rewarding social relationships that encourage people to practise at becoming effective individually and collectively. This highlights the potential of volunteering to create the psychosocial foundations for people to develop the skilful social behaviour (e.g. managing conflict, cooperation, assertion of rights) required to re-configure who benefits in development efforts.

### **8 Networked reciprocity, autonomy and ownership**

It is widely acknowledged that people give more of themselves to ideas and activities they have some ownership over. Wellbeing theory emphasises that this ownership has to be subjectively experienced as feelings of control and autonomy. The Valuing Volunteering research found that reciprocity is an important quality of volunteer relationships for reinforcing a sense among people in poverty that volunteering is a resource that they can use to further their aims.

When reciprocity characterises the exchanges of a network of linked actors, people get to feel self-directed as part of a wider group or collective effort. This is motivating and socially rewarding. Collective agendas become internalised as personal ones and improvements in personal wellbeing are tethered to a social commitment to do well together. When the organisation of volunteers and their work is too individualised or when volunteers are regarded as ‘expert’ and local actors as ‘beneficiary’, reciprocity is rarely a feature of volunteer networks.

#### **8.1 The importance of reciprocity for wellbeing-enhancing experiences**

In Nepal, we found that two-way (i.e. where actors give and receive) relationships between volunteers and the people they work with allow both sets of actors – and their worldviews – to influence what changes are made in an educational setting. As well as resulting in more appropriate solutions, reciprocal exchanges can also support the important psychosocial experiences that improve wellbeing among people living and working in high poverty contexts. They help individuals to play to their strengths while experiencing the sense of relatedness that comes from feeling part of a bigger effort. People are more likely to feel able to take on difficult issues when they don’t have to go it alone. As Elizabeth Hacker (Valuing Volunteering researcher, Nepal) summed up in one of our cross-country analysis sessions, ‘Creating spaces where people are self-directed with others is really important... because you can be overwhelmed with what you face and change can feel so small, but with group processes it can feel very different psychologically’.<sup>7</sup> Similar conclusions have been reached in neighbourhood change initiatives in the USA. Relationships between disenfranchised groups and people who become their allies encourage actors to take risks and set goals they would not even think were possible on their own (Bailey 2006).

In two-way or multi-way exchanges, which involve more than one set of actors (e.g. the volunteers, people in poverty, local power holders) giving, everyone gets to strengthen their sense of competency through the process of changing things. By contrast, in one-way volunteer relationships the assets and resources of people living in poverty usually get ignored, closing spaces down for people to learn about their own strengths and the competency of others. Without developing this knowledge, it is difficult for actors to be mutually reliant on one another for making change happen and it is difficult for people to share ownership of the outcomes.

This is not to say that every exchange is equal in what volunteers and the people they work with contribute or that power and influence are always perfectly balanced. Reciprocity is a good principle to work towards but patterns of social action and interaction are more complex in collaborative efforts to effect change. The Valuing Volunteering research learned about the specific value of the emotional and practical support provided by volunteers to people seeking to step out of their comfort zone into uncertainty. It also saw how the fastest route to change is sometimes via volunteers using their power (e.g. social standing, social networks) to influence actors in positions of responsibility. For example, in Nepal, international volunteers' separate identity was useful in bringing legitimacy to teachers and through leveraging funding from organisations.

Interestingly, inquiries in the Philippines found that imbalances in terms of who contributes what or who holds greater power do not undermine wellbeing among people living in poverty, so long as these actors experience autonomy in their interactions with volunteers. For example, the wellbeing reflections of local youth groups indicated that seeking advice from national and international volunteers on specific aspects of a change process (e.g. how to find a venue, how to run a meeting) does not affect the general experience of competence where the young people decided for themselves that help was needed. Where young people were given time in the Philippines to consider their objectives alongside the attributes of an international volunteer, they were able to use how others would perceive the volunteer to open doors to discuss their project with newly elected local officials. This situation *feels* quite different to being offered advice by a volunteer because someone devising a development programme considers the provision of help to be a good idea. In the latter scenario, the person in poverty perceives the volunteer to be the one who owns the idea to make change happen. But in situations where the people volunteers work with are self-directed about their actions and interactions, volunteers become an additional resource at their disposal. Dependency on volunteer assistance is averted because a sense of ownership over the change process is experienced among local actors.

### **8.2 The potential in volunteering interventions for networked reciprocity**

Social network theorists have emphasised the importance of social ties and connectivity between people for understanding how actors are encouraged to have certain roles in social change processes

(e.g. Carlsson and Sanström 2008; Crona and Hubacek 2010). There were few, if any, examples in the Valuing Volunteering research of effective volunteers working alone. As we saw earlier, they build informal and formal relationships through shared experiences and doing with others. Sometimes volunteers have to create social networks (e.g. through inspiring and mobilising local actors) and sometimes they tap existing ones (e.g. connections between institutions). When these networks are characterised by reciprocity they are at their most human. They are personally motivating and socially rewarding.

Informal volunteering provides some of the best models for networked reciprocity. For example, in the Philippines the process of using *bayanihan* to build houses was described as everyone bringing their specific skill set to the group effort. Everyone involved has a responsibility, role and commitment to fulfil. Importantly, the interdependence underpinning informal kinds of volunteering is emotional as well as transactional. Members of the self-help savings and lending groups that organically emerged in the Korogocho neighbourhood in Kenya are able to rely on one another because of the trust and solidarity they experience. At the same time, the design of the lending groups does not ignore the fact that the individuals participating need to experience a sense of control and have their own motivations for participating (e.g. to invest in the family business). The group as a whole has its identity and mission as well as the individuals within it. When success is a collective phenomenon, a sense of control and ownership is shared. Individuals cannot get ahead without maintaining the trustworthiness of the network. This reinforces the importance of relationships for change and encourages people to work together again, increasing the likelihood that initiatives become self-sustaining.

### **8.3 Some way to go**

Volunteering for development interventions frequently fall short of mimicking the networked reciprocity of informal volunteering systems because of an individualised approach to social change which gives prominence to the volunteer. In the Philippines, one inquiry collaborated with the GlobalGiving storytelling project<sup>9</sup> to analyse stories of change from national and international volunteers as well as community members. It found that when community actors – youth groups, residents, university students, government workers, seaweed farmers – were most involved in events in the story, they were described by the storyteller as being ‘leaders who organised’ only a third of the time. Mostly, they were ‘followers who

participated', with a handful of community actors classified as victims, bystanders and perpetrators. By contrast, in the stories where volunteers were most involved in what happened, they were classified as 'leaders who organised' over 90 per cent of the time. The volunteers were in roles with greater responsibility for making change happen than those living in poverty. In many of the volunteers' social network maps,<sup>9</sup> residents, farmers or local youth groups only appeared towards the end of the change process, as participants who turned up, rather than as co-creators in the ideas, planning and operational phases.

On examining the change process interaction by interaction, it appeared that each encounter between a volunteer and someone living in poverty is a building block of people's psychosocial experience; an opportunity which would determine how participation, empowerment and ownership outcomes would be distributed. Even though the volunteers were primed to work in a participatory way, a single instructional interaction between a volunteer and a local actor at the beginning of a volunteer placement quickly became a chain of one-way exchanges which fixed volunteers into delivery roles and people in poverty into receiving ones. The finding emphasised how difficult volunteers find it to make reciprocity a feature of their relationships at the outset.

The challenge is that volunteering for development is rarely organised in a way that helps the volunteer to work in a reciprocal way. Firstly, the Valuing Volunteering research learned how in efforts to satisfy predominant norms around assistance and development, volunteering interventions are positioned as the provision of experts with 'cutting-edge' skills. This both satisfies donors and looks attractive to local partners. But this framing reinforces notions that external knowledge is more valuable than native knowledge. It affects how volunteers are perceived by people living in poverty and it affects how volunteers interpret their own role.

Secondly, recruitment processes, placement descriptions and volunteer support systems are designed to serve individuals, but not sustain networks of actors. Most of the resource for volunteer programming is directed towards the recruitment and training of volunteers. The change process starts with the individual volunteer and works out from there. It is concerned with placing a responsible and active agent of change but gives little attention to the wider relational dynamics that will ultimately constrain or enable social action. In

cases where volunteers do manage to build social networks and mobilise local action, there is no resource available to support those who want to join the change effort. The only actor resourced to work in high poverty contexts is the volunteer. Quite quickly the momentum for change dissipates as people get distracted by more immediate concerns like putting food on the table.

It would be much easier for volunteers to build reciprocal relationships if more attention was paid to their interconnectedness, and specifically how they become an effective contribution to a wider group effort. The implication is that volunteering for development agencies need to pay as much attention to relational styles as individual attributes when designing placements and selecting volunteers. For example, there were few examples of volunteering for development programming successfully supporting people living in poverty to figure out what is important to them and the direction of travel they seek to head in *before* help is offered by a volunteer. A network focus would align sector practice more closely with the realities of how volunteers achieve outcomes through their relationships. It also creates many more possibilities for integrating a role for volunteers into non-volunteering development programmes and projects to strengthen their impact.

## 9 Concluding comments

This article provides a theoretical and empirical grounding for understanding how volunteers affect change through their relationships with people living and working in high poverty contexts. It suggests that relationships based on informality, doing together and networked reciprocity are important foundations of wellbeing and social change. They provide some indication of the relational styles and psychosocial experiences that should be intentionally fostered by volunteers in the field. The insights have broader implications for the way social action is realised as a process with other people. If the future of international development is going to give more prominence to social innovation then its interventions need to better understand the relational dynamics that make collaboration personally rewarding and socially meaningful.

As a strategy for improving people's lives, volunteering is a different way of doing development. It is not social change delivered through aid or agencies but enabled through people. The social value that volunteers create happens *in relation* with the efforts of others. It is an approach which resists

the ‘methodological individualism’ of mainstream economic thinking (Devereux and McGregor 2014) and the atomistic way current paradigms in research and development typically treat people as separate, functional units with specific needs (O’Hara and Lyon 2014). Investment in people’s interconnectedness and interdependence is all the more unpredictable and tricky because success is contingent on the simultaneous effectiveness of individuals and

collectives. Participation, empowerment and ownership have become development gospel but it may be that volunteering can do one better and make these outcomes socially relevant. At their best, volunteer relationships can also strengthen solidarity, a knowledge of others’ strengths and social commitment. The result is skilful social behaviour, which increases the likelihood that people will succeed in finding ways to do well together.

## Notes

- 1 *Bayanihan* is a Filipino term embodying mutual assistance and self-help in times of need and togetherness in a common effort
- 2 International Citizen Service is a UK government-funded development programme bringing 18–25-year-olds from the UK together with young people overseas to achieve lasting, positive change for marginalised and vulnerable groups.

## References

- Aked, J. (2014a) *Valuing Volunteering – The Philippines National Report*, Brighton and London: IDS and VSO
- Aked, J. (2014b) *Views from the Watershed. How Citizens and Actors Describe Volunteering for Development*, Brighton and London: IDS and VSO
- Aked, J. (2012) ‘Participation Among Marginalized Young People in Brazil: Using Action Research to Support Subjective Well-being in Volunteering’, *Philippine Journal of Public Administration* 56.1: 40–60
- Bailey, T.J. (2006) *Ties that Bind: The Practice of Social Networks*, Baltimore MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Bidee, J.; Vantilborgh, T.; Pepermans, R.; Huybrechts, G.; Willems, J.; Jegers, M. and Hofmans, J. (2012) ‘Autonomous Motivation Stimulates Volunteers’ Work Effort: A Self-determination Theory Approach to Volunteerism’, *Voluntas* 24.1: 32–47
- Booth, D. (2012) *Development as a Collective Action Problem: Addressing the Real Challenges of African Governance*, Africa Power and Politics Programme, London: Overseas Development Institute
- Burns, D.; Picken, A.; Hacker, E.; Aked, J.; Turner, K.; Lewis, S. and Lopez Franco, E. (2015) *The Role of Volunteering in Sustainable Development*, Brighton and London: IDS and VSO
- Carlsson, L. and Sandström, A. (2008) ‘Network Governance of the Commons’, *International Journal of the Commons* 2: 33–45
- Citizenship DRC (2011) *Blurring the Boundaries: Citizen Action Across States and Societies*, Brighton: Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability
- Crona, B. and Hubacek, K. (2010) ‘The Right Connections: How do Social Networks Lubricate the Machinery of Natural Resource Governance?’, *Ecology and Society* 15.4, Guest Editorial
- Deneulin, S. and McGregor, J.A. (2010) ‘The Capability Approach and the Politics of a Social Conception of Wellbeing’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 13.4: 501–19
- Devereux, S. and McGregor, J.A. (2014) ‘Transforming Social Protection: Human Wellbeing and Social Justice’, *European Journal of Development Research* 26.3: 296–310
- Fiske, S.T. (2008) ‘From Lewin and Allport to Pettigrew: Modern Practical Theories’, in U. Wagner, L.R. Tropp, G. Finchilescu and C. Tredoux (eds), *Improving Intergroup Relations*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
- Fowler, J.H. and Christakis, N.A. (2010) ‘Cooperative Behaviour Cascades in Human Social Networks’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107.12: 5334–8
- Fredrickson, B. (2012) ‘Love – A New Lens on the Science of Thriving’, recorded at Young Minds 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxoPLtRnxZs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxoPLtRnxZs) (accessed 18 April 2015)
- Fredrickson, B. (1998) ‘What Good are Positive Emotions?’, *Review of General Psychology* 2: 300–19
- Fredrickson, B.L. and Branigan, C. (2005) ‘Positive Emotions Broaden the Scope of Attention and Thought-action Repertoires’, *Cognition and Emotion* 19: 313–32
- 3 Interview, 29 August 2013.
- 4 Interview, 7 May 2013.
- 5 Interview, 23 May 2013.
- 6 Interview, 28 September 2013.
- 7 Interview, 26 October 2013.
- 8 See [www.globalgiving.org/storytelling](http://www.globalgiving.org/storytelling).
- 9 Social network mapping exercise adapted from Net-map toolbox. See <https://netmap.wordpress.com>.

- Fredrickson, B.L.; Tugade, M.M. and Waugh, C.E. (2003) 'What Good are Positive Emotions in a Crisis? A Prospective Study of Resilience and Emotions Following the Terrorist Attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84.2: 365–76
- Gagné, M. and Deci, E.L. (2005) 'Self-determination Theory and Work Motivation', *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 26: 331–62
- Haivas, S.; Hofmans, J. and Pepermans, R. (2012) 'Self-determination Theory as a Framework for Exploring the Impact of the Organizational Context on Volunteer Motivation: A Study of Romanian Volunteers', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 41.6: 1195–214
- Halpern, D. (2010) *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Helliwell, J. (2012) *Understanding and Improving the Social Context of Well-being*, NEBR Working Paper 18486, <http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/jhelliwell/papers/w18486.pdf> (accessed 21 March 2015)
- Helliwell, J. and Putnam, R.D. (2006) 'The Social Context of Well-being', in F. Huppert, N. Baylis and B. Keverne (eds), *The Science of Well-Being*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hoffman, E. (2011) *The Inner Lives of Cultures*, London: Counterpoint
- Huppert, F.A. (2008) *State-of-Science Review: SR-X2 Psychological Wellbeing: Evidence Regarding its Causes and Consequences*, London: Government Office for Science, [http://cep.lse.ac.uk/conference\\_papers/10\\_10\\_2008/huppert2.pdf](http://cep.lse.ac.uk/conference_papers/10_10_2008/huppert2.pdf) (accessed 26 April 2015)
- IDEO (2009) *The Human Centred Development Toolkit*, [www.ideo.com/work/human-centered-design-toolkit](http://www.ideo.com/work/human-centered-design-toolkit) (accessed 21 March 2015)
- Isen, A. and Daubman, K. (1984) 'The Influence of Affect on Categorization', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 47: 1206–17
- Johnson, K. and Fredrickson, B. (2005) "'We All Look the Same to Me": Positive Emotions Eliminate the Own-race Bias in Face Recognition', *Psychological Science* 16: 875–82
- Lewis, D. (2006) 'Globalization and International Service: A Development Perspective', *Voluntary Action* 7.2: 13–26
- Lough, B.J. and Matthew, L. (2013) *Measuring and Conveying the Added Value of International Volunteering*, Forum Discussion Paper, [www.france-volontaires.org/IMG/pdf/ivco2013\\_measuring\\_and\\_conveying\\_the\\_added\\_value\\_of\\_international\\_volunteering\\_lough.pdf](http://www.france-volontaires.org/IMG/pdf/ivco2013_measuring_and_conveying_the_added_value_of_international_volunteering_lough.pdf) (accessed 4 March 2015)
- Millette, V. and Gagné, M. (2008) 'Designing Volunteers' Tasks to Maximize Motivation, Satisfaction and Performance: The Impact of Job Characteristics on Volunteer Engagement', *Motivation and Emotion* 32: 11–32
- Molix, L.A. and Nichols, C.P. (2013) 'Satisfaction of Basic Psychological Needs as a Mediator of the Relationship between Community Esteem and Wellbeing', *International Journal of Wellbeing* 3.1: 20–34
- Moore, H. (2015) 'The End of Development', *Analysis*, BBC Radio 4, broadcast 8 March 2015, [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b054pqv8](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b054pqv8) (accessed 21 March 2015)
- NEF (2011) *Measuring our Progress. The Power of Well-being*, London: New Economics Foundation
- O'Hara, M. and Lyon, A. (2014) 'Well-being and Well-becoming: Reauthorizing the Subject in Incoherent Times', in T.J. Hämmäläinen and J. Michaelson (eds), *Well-Being and Beyond*, Edward Elgar Publishing
- Oostlander, J.; Güntert, S.T.; van Schie, S. and Wehner, T. (2013) 'Leadership and Volunteer Motivation: A Study Using Self-determination Theory', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* XX.X: 1–21
- Oswald, K. and Clarke, P. (2010) 'Reflecting Collectively on Capacities for Change', *IDS Bulletin* 41.3, Brighton: IDS
- Pelling, M.; High, C.; Dearing, J. and Smith, D. (2008) 'Shadow Spaces for Social Learning: A Relational Understanding of Adaptive Capacity to Climate Change within Organisations', *Environment and Planning A* 40.4: 867–84
- Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone – The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York NY: Simon and Schuster
- Rowson, J.; Broome, S. and Jones, A. (2010) *Connected Communities: How Social Networks Power and Sustain the Big Society*, London: RSA Projects
- Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2000) 'Self-determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development and Well-being', *American Psychologist* 55: 67–8
- Sennett, R. (2012) *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, New Haven CT: Yale University Press
- Simões, F. and Alarcão, M. (2014) 'Promoting Well-being in School-based Mentoring Through Basic Psychological Needs Support: Does it Really Count?', *Journal of Happiness Studies* 15: 407–24
- Stiglitz, J.E.; Sen, A. and Fitoussi, J. (2009) *Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*, [www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/en/index.htm](http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/en/index.htm) (accessed 27 May 2015)

VSO (2014) *VSO's Global Theory of Change: Bringing People Together to Fight Poverty*, London: VSO  
World Bank Institute (2013) *Leadership: The World Bank Institute's Leadership for Development Program*,

<http://wbi.worldbank.org/wbi/content/leadership-world-bank-institute%E2%80%99s-leadership-development-program> (accessed 4 March 2015)