

Active citizenship: the role of older adults in community building

Irene Hardill and Sue Baines

Nottingham Trent University Graduate School, Business, Law and Social Sciences

E-mail: irene.hardill@ntu.ac.uk

Introduction and policy context

- Focus on the contribution of older adults to community building through their unpaid work for voluntary organisations.
- Mainstreaming of the third sector - and the broadening of the activities of voluntary organisations.
- Importance of the local level – national and regional policy towards third sector delivered at sub-regional (local) level
- Voluntary organisations now also engage in public service delivery, policy-making, partnership working and/or participation in governance especially at the regional and local level.
- One third of sector's funding from statutory sources, an indication of the scale of engagement with public policy
- More expected of third sector workforce (paid staff and volunteers), shortages of volunteers, not all voluntary organisations use older volunteers.

Volunteering

- Volunteers, volunteer efforts and many voluntary organisations are embedded in a community context.
 - Traditional motives for volunteering - philanthropy and mutual aid.
 - Gerontologists identify older women as “kin keepers”, sustaining the family, but research also shows that they may well act as “neighbourhood keepers”.
 - The neighbourhood/community context both influences the causal processes shaping volunteering and can be the target of volunteer efforts.
 - For older people, the neighbourhood may be even more important than for younger people.
 - Older people and social capital: community asset is their knowledge, skill and life experience.
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Older volunteers

- In 2005 individuals aged 50 – 74 years were more likely to volunteer than younger adults (except 16-19 year olds); only above age 75 does the propensity to volunteer decline.
- Volunteering helps maintain active lives and plays a key role in minimising the risk of social exclusion and ill health.
- Volunteers can play many different roles within organisations - as service providers, as decision-makers and as mentors, virtual volunteers.

Who are older adults?

- Over 50s are highly differentiated and heterogeneous, up to 3 generations.
- Over 50s span 'working life' and 'retirement' binary.
- Growing numbers in paid work beyond state pension age (SPA) (some a choice; others because of financial constraints).
- Older adults when they 'retire' remain active as community builders
 - make an economic and social contribution to communities,
 - consumers ('grey' market),
 - active citizens (informal and formal volunteers, carers for family members, grandchildren, partners, parents).

Older community builders

- Ageing can be associated with an intensification of feelings about locality and space.
- The neighbourhood may contribute significantly to older people's quality (or lack) of daily life.
- Neighbourhoods can become more than a source of security, the base of a supportive social network, and a source of identity.
- It is therefore important that policy makers understand the meanings and motives older adults attach to voluntary work, and the role older adults play in social cohesion.

Empirical study of older volunteers

- Study of volunteers aged 50+ in-depth micro sociological research in a deprived community (ESRC grant R000220592).
- Understand how volunteers negotiate the constraints and opportunities in their daily lives, and manage to create (emotional, temporal and physical) space for volunteering (i.e., for formal voluntary organisations).
- Case study community – Brightville, East Midlands, captured some of the diversity of social welfare voluntary organisations in the community

Social welfare organisations in Brightville

1. **Community Centre:** community education centre, pool of 3-4 under 40 years, current manager was once a volunteer
2. **Government Project:** assist families and young children to be successful and confident in their lives, volunteers must have a child below 5 years)
3. **Family Charity:** offers volunteer home visiting support to families (with one child below 5 years) under stress, volunteers 63 (largely women, of all ages), must have been a parent.
4. **Community Project:** community service organisation: luncheon club, befriending, shopping, gardening and DIY etc., volunteers: 103 (43 male, 60 female, of all ages)

Methods

- Visited volunteering sites, observed meetings events
- Interviewed
 - Volunteers
 - Former volunteers now paid workers
 - Managers
 - Stakeholders
- Focus groups

Volunteers

- Volunteers drawn from Brightville but also from neighbouring town, Irontown, unmet need recognised within and outwith community
- 10 of the 24 who currently volunteer 50+ ,
- Some former older volunteers now reconnected to paid work (such as Chas)
- Older volunteers work in service delivery roles for 2 of the 4 organisations – Family Charity and Community Project
- Older volunteers also fulfil trustee roles for both the Family Charity and Community Project (both Chairs are retired professionals from Irontown)

Community Laundry of Community Project



Community Project Luncheon Club



Older volunteers – complex motives

- **Mutual aid** (giving to each other) Jean, 50s lives in Brightville, paid worker who began to volunteer for the CP after working for them 'without Community Project there'd be a lot of people in a mess..., or not knowing which way to turn. I'm proud to be part of them'
- **Philanthropy** (giving alms) Miranda, 50s lives in Irontown, full-time carer of disabled son 'I can't imagine not working for Family Charity' she is a 'lady bountiful' figure
- **Getting on** (volunteering a pathway into paid work) Grant, 50s completing training for Family Charity - 'I thought it could be a foot in the door for social work'
- **Getting by** (reacting to a personal need or circumstance, form of self help) Bernard, retired accountant, 60s 'doing something useful'; volunteers with wife, 'we make a team'

Discussion

- More and more older adults giving time and using their skills to community building
- Most voluntary organisations have problems recruiting and retaining volunteers – trustees and for service delivery
- Work of the voluntary sector growing – and there is a broadening of their roles with the current Government focus on partnership working at regional and sub-regional level.
- But aligning volunteering for improving individual positions in the labour market says little for those who are “beyond” the labour market (because of age, disability or care commitments).

Discussion 2

- Some recent UK research has pointed to various barriers - institutional and attitudinal – that appear to be deterring people from taking up volunteering in later life, such as insurance restrictions, health and safety regulations and lack of access for disabled people.
- Our research provides supporting evidence for the importance of building on both the intrinsic and the instrumental rewards of volunteering - and keeping an appropriate balance between them.

Policy implications

- Older volunteers drawn to wide range of voluntary organisations
- Regional and sub-regional third sector infrastructure organisations role in capacity building – key message think of volunteers who are 'beyond' the labour market (age, disability etc)
- Third sector important 'business cluster' social enterprises, training provider, role in building individual and community social capital
- Qualitative experience of volunteering may be changing in lean third sector organisations that are being 'stretched' by mainstreaming.