

# Ticking our Boxes – the view from the ground

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## Introduction

The history of volunteering is peppered with the good deeds of everyday people effecting change within society. The plethora of research and surveys on volunteering show that the majority of people still count their number one reason for volunteering as altruistic. Yet we are now being sold volunteering as an activity to tick the boxes of multiple politicians' and policymakers' agendas. They believe that volunteering may solve many social ills, and that this can best be achieved by heaping paperwork and regulations upon us.

Making volunteering social policy has bought rewards for organisations, but alongside the welcome funding now available is a growing number of stifling regulations, plus much red tape and bureaucracy. Although this has been subject to some criticism of late (see the Commission on the Future of Volunteering report *Manifesto for Change*), the criticism leaves underlying assumptions intact, one that presumes organisations and volunteers need to be monitored, regulated and policed. This article aims to question not just the technical problems of the overbearing paperwork involved in what could be simply called "doing the right thing" but the principles and assumptions underlying the formalisation of volunteering. This article seeks to address the main reasons why policymakers and practitioners sadly argue for more, as opposed to less, formalisation.

## 1. Developing good practice and providing accountability

It is argued that we need to embed a framework of quality assurances across the board to enable organisations to provide the best opportunities for volunteers and to ensure society is reaping the benefits volunteering can provide. There is a healthy discussion on whether this is necessary or indeed positive, largely focusing on the contradiction between – on the one hand – formal good practice policies and paperwork and – on the other – the informal nature of volunteering and how prescribing a "one size fits all" policy diminishes the variety of community action that exists. Yet working groups on quality assurance and tick box lists are multiplying at an extraordinary rate in an attempt to grapple with developing so-called good practice whilst retaining the independence and informal nature of volunteering.

It is possible to read then that hidden behind the development of good practice lies distrust of voluntary organisations and their ability to provide the best opportunities they can for volunteers. Good intentions are not lacking – neither is a will to ensure everyone can volunteer – but there is a presumption that the obstacles to more people volunteering may reside within the practice of organisations and that safeguards are essential to protect volunteers from the organisations that recruit them. Yet volunteers choose organisations and we should take care not to diminish their judgement or choice by bureaucratic procedures, which are a poor substitute. Aside from confirming the obvious health and safety necessary for any place of work it is in the interest of organisations which rely on or are run by volunteers to ensure that opportunities they provide involve a positive experience, make a difference and that voluntary contributions are recognised. The present onus on formalising (by which we mean regulation, monitoring and supervising) may deter organisations from taking on volunteers; more problematic still, it may deter concerned citizens from creating new voluntary endeavours. Developing bureaucratic initiatives that seek to protect and regulate rather than provide volunteers with the means to get on with it shows distrust for anything that is formally unsupervised. This in fact may demean and sideline the everyday experiences of organisations that depend on the goodwill of volunteers, organisations that have, until late, had no need for such bureaucratic structures. If we want to see well resourced, informal, community based volunteering in the future, where volunteers can participate in a variety of activities when and where they choose, we need to trust people to get on with it. However, so deeply engrained is this distrust (in ourselves as well as in others) that a "hands off" approach is seen as – at best – naïve and – at worst – irresponsible. The time and resources wasted on ensuring people are working in the right way sadly reflects a real contempt for our abilities and a suspicion of our motivations.

Of course, providing training and expertise for those who want it can be invaluable – there are some bottom lines that can help us all do our jobs, paid or unpaid, but scrape the surface of many of these imposed frameworks and you find a layer of suspicion. One meeting WORLDwrite attended about the development of good practice accreditation programmes highlighted that it is often not the government programmes that are insisting on these frameworks (although they are supporters of such an easy tick box affair) but voluntary organisations themselves. Many sit on these advisory groups and question the voluntary sector’s ability to provide the right services without the watchful eye of those who know better. In the meeting WORLDwrite argued that even more quality frameworks would undermine volunteering, not least by imposing even more rules by which to abide. For example, when WORLDwrite looked into accessing an external quality benchmark for our volunteer programme the obvious (and perhaps only) award was Investing in Volunteers. They asked for evidence, policies and procedures such as volunteer interviews, application forms, supervision, and so on. This flies in the face of what volunteers at WORLDwrite have identified, year after year, as best practice, namely the informal, open door policy we continue to operate where we do not have application forms to fill in or interviews to sweat over; nor do we ask volunteers to tell us what is essentially information about their private lives. When this was pointed out in the meeting it was argued that this wasn’t a problem as organisations could choose whether or not to take up the good practices and benchmarks available. This is, to say the least, disingenuous, as it is difficult to stick your head above the parapet and reject these stamps of approval when many funders require them and organisations are continually asked to “tick the boxes” to prove their legitimacy. This cloaked finger pointing, couched in paternalistic language, does nothing to help smaller organisations provide the very best opportunities for volunteers and shows a real disdain for those struggling to make a difference and who want to do this by getting more people involved.

Where, for example, would all of this leave a new campaign for change or project to meet a local need that has been set up by a group of concerned young citizens who are not doing it for the money? Their voluntary endeavour is doubtless something we would all like to see more of, but would they get a stamp of approval? Do they, as volunteers themselves, have to invent application procedures, volunteer goal plans, supervision forms and structures to get their mates involved? If they don’t and are unaligned to a regulatory body, can they access funding? The pressure to conform is relentless.

The relationships built between volunteers and organisations are formed voluntarily and blossom because of their informal nature. And yet we see more and more the regulation of informal social spaces, as if leaving people unsupervised will lead to catastrophe. In all the discussion on how to provide the best choices and opportunities for volunteers we have omitted asking whether volunteers should be allowed to choose to volunteer without interference. If we want to support organisations and volunteers we need to start by trusting our motivations and abilities. We need to challenge and ultimately reject the paper-based version of CCTV – the long lists of boxes to tick and forms to complete – before excessive regulation makes the everyday work of and with volunteers impossible.

We might also ask to whom do these prescriptive best practice guidelines make us accountable. Surely we want accountability to those we assist rather than to regulating, supervising or government bodies. Having to account for activities and expenditure to a funder or donor is one thing, having to account for what volunteers are up to and who they are is Orwellian Big Brother stuff and wholly anti-democratic.

## **2. Promoting diversity and fighting discrimination**

In recent years we have seen a dramatic increase in the information organisations are required to get from volunteers, information that used to be deemed private to the individual. We are told that this is good practice. For example V (the charity born from the government’s Russell Commission on youth volunteering) prides itself in leading the way, yet has recently adding a young person’s sexual orientation to their monitoring categories. It is assumed that the provision of great volunteering opportunities for all is dependent on a worker knowing the inside leg measurements and emotional landscape of a volunteer. One would assume that there must be substantial evidence of its contribution to combating discrimination to allow such levels of intrusion to go largely unchallenged. Yet there isn’t any evidence that categorising and collecting such data works and, as we shall see, it can in fact be detrimental.

Let's start with the technical. It is argued that collecting such data is a useful tool for organisations to identify those they may be excluding and then do something about it. (If not it at least provides a way to "name and shame".) But how helpful are these categories? Take for example the category "socially excluded". WORLDwrite has never categorised volunteers as "socially excluded" or not as it is the charity's experience that volunteers who are less skilled or lack opportunities do not want to be boxed or singled out in this way. In fact, it can be argued that the very way people with less opportunities or skills are singled out as a separate, special category sets them apart as different from the norm and therefore socially excludes them. This is then, by definition, self-defeating.

At WORLDwrite, volunteers (especially those who would be seen as "socially excluded") do not want to be boxed and separated, instead they want to effect change, meet all sorts of people and join in. For example, a group of local girls needed money to make a film at WORLDwrite and applied to the British Youth Council for a grant. The application procedure stated young people must complete the application themselves and so they did. They were taken aback when they discovered a section on the form asking for a description of the nature of their social exclusion. They had to decide if they wanted to reveal that they came from black single parent families, had an unemployed Mum, lived in a council flat and shared one room with their brothers and sisters. To them it was insulting to discover they were being targeted for "inclusion" and felt that it wasn't anyone's business how they lived. They were indeed surprised to learn that being poor and black meant that they were "socially excluded", and wanted to know who thought so little of them!

These days more and more individuals and groups are being pigeonholed as "socially excluded", vulnerable or as some other special category and these groups, by their very definition, are seen as separate and in need of our special attention (and so even more surveillance). Providing resources and what people need is always a good thing, but this special attention is geared towards recording and monitoring volunteers. This simultaneously collapses many into the same box (if you are black you are socially excluded) whilst separating them from mainstream society, the very thing such monitoring set out to counter.

Let's take another example: monitoring sexual orientation. It is argued that monitoring somebody's sexual preference is important to combat discrimination and exclusion. But let's get real here. Firstly, it is impossible to collect this data without huge gaps that would render it useless, e.g. the amount of people who would not tell you. Secondly, even if we could gain accurate information, why would that help? It is assumed both that there are organisations that are prejudiced and that monitoring will somehow change this. The minority of organisations who believe homosexuality to be wrong (due to religious or other beliefs) still mostly recognise that providing opportunities fairly to all overrides any beliefs they may hold privately. For those who don't, monitoring whom they work with won't convince them to change their beliefs or their working practices. As Kyle Duncan puts it in his article *Monitoring Sexual Orientation*: "Even if such box ticking did reveal serious prejudicial beliefs, which is highly unlikely, the monitoring does nothing to actually change the attitudes of those people... a good first step would be to eliminate this monitoring altogether, which presumes both the vulnerability of LGBT people and the potential danger of everybody else." Volunteers' privacy must remain intact and what they do with their precious spare time should be enjoyed without intrusion.

And what about race, colour, culture? The causal relationship between group membership and inequalities is not a given. For example, it is well documented that young Afro-Caribbean boys do less well in the education system, but so do Bangladeshi boys (but not necessarily Indian boys) and white boys from high population areas living on sink estates. Separating people out into ill-defined categories and boxes tells us very little about why they are underachieving and does not change the fact of it. For schools to reflect upon who is underachieving is one thing – in order to provide more and better teaching. For volunteer organisations to reflect on the background and circumstances of who is involved completely misses the likely underlying causes and papers over social inequalities. It assumes organisations are failing to "reach" those deemed "socially excluded" rather than dealing with or questioning material circumstances which preclude people volunteering. One of the main obstacles to volunteering, and for that matter equality, is material deprivation. Collecting this information doesn't help people from impoverished backgrounds free up their time. It is also worth mentioning that many people who may not volunteer formally help out their families, friends and neighbours; it's normal. This is not seen as volunteering, perhaps rightly so, but in our

rush to box and include people we risk assuming that this everyday informal help is somehow not good enough. We may therefore in fact be belittling the good deeds done everyday.

Ultimately the process of classification creates many of the problems it is supposed to solve as it focuses on our supposed differences, on fixing our identities and on categorising us. Yet people's identities and circumstances are fluid, they change, they are not fixed or natural but created through relating to others and shaping the world. Volunteering is a great example of this. It is a collective action that transcends the identities we may have privately (including our sex, our age, our genes, our gender) because of shared public cause. What good can come by boxing and categorising us? Once resources and opportunities become linked to particular groups or categories then, rather than removing the material barriers for all, these groups are set up against each other in the laborious and bureaucratic fight for the limited resources available. This is not engaging with the real inequalities in our society. It is also a demeaned view of democracy and representation. Democracy should mean everybody having full freedom to pursue different beliefs and practices in private whilst ensuring in the public sphere we are all equal.

This degraded notion of representation and democracy is worrying. Organisations are told they need to demonstrate representation from all groups in order to show they are providing equal opportunities, often without the resources that could really change lives. For example, finding funding to ensure your centre is accessible for wheelchair users is not easy, but finding a few disabled people to tick off in your monitoring reports can be enough. You need to include East European immigrants but not do anything about the draconian immigration laws which deny some the right to work altogether. This means we can go on ticking the boxes whilst inequalities remain in our society, ensuring we include the ones that are getting a raw deal without trying to change the actual inequalities they have to put up with. The truth is that there are individuals and groups that live on the poverty line and therefore are excluded from a variety of society's opportunities, including volunteering. Why? Because volunteering is something we do in our free time and free time is a luxury for those who can afford it. The numerous pieces of research into the barriers of volunteering have found the obvious – that it is the lack of this free time, the lack of money and of resources that stop the majority volunteering. What we need to fight for is a society where it is a matter of choice, not circumstances, which stop people volunteering. Of course some will choose not to volunteer, that is up to them; surveys have shown that sometimes people do not volunteer for personal reasons that should not be seen as a barrier to overcome, nor should it make them a "bad person". It's life.

### **3. Keeping us safe**

The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act will make vetting compulsory for all adults who volunteer with children or vulnerable adults. Although the legislation is not formally recognised until autumn 2008, many organisations are already vetting volunteers as just another procedure to complete before someone can volunteer.

It seems that voluntary organisations have accepted this legislation, in fact many welcome the vetting of volunteers even though they share concerns that it is already putting people off volunteering, particularly men, because of the rigmarole and the suspicion it induces. For example, WORLDwrite used to organise very successful youth exchanges around the world, but now we have to vet everyone who is not deemed vulnerable, because if you are not vulnerable then you must be, by definition, potentially dangerous. This on top of the arduous paperwork, cost and processes involved has meant we have more or less stopped these great experiences for under-16s. In fact, WORLDwrite has more or less decided to stop working with under-16s altogether, since it is just too much of a minefield. Even attempting to CRB check overseas families would be rude, impossible and ridiculous. We would have to put in place and pay for too many CRB checks, since at our centre people often just muck in; we don't have an official mentoring scheme, but this happens spontaneously where volunteers see another volunteer needing help and offer it. This spontaneous way of working is perhaps something that would be frowned upon now.

The debate that does exist within the volunteering world is focused on the legislation going too far, but the argument that "if it saves one life it's worth it" is accepted by most. Actually, it is not just the legislation that increases police checking to over 5 million of the population; the new levels of surveillance and policing on workers and volunteers have, to a large extent, been developed by the voluntary sector itself.

One example of this is that some Chief Executives of charities have had to sign a release form allowing their trustees to obtain their bank statements to ensure they are not taking bribes from volunteers who wish to avoid being police checked.

We can see how this level of distrust and suspicion casts a wide net to include more or less anybody wanting to work with designated vulnerable groups, and although the invasion of such private information is dismaying, it is not surprising. It is an example of a wider cultural shift in which fear and distrust dominate even the most ordinary of our everyday activities. Worryingly the voluntary sector is part of encouraging the fear and casting suspicion on the very thing that makes us human – our desire to help others. We are not trusted simply because we want to help people who are in need, our motivations are under scrutiny and we are guilty until proven innocent. It has gone so far that even if your CRB check is clean today you will still have to be subjected to further CRB checks in the near future, as you may well change for the worse the next day.

This, WORLDwrite believes, is having a devastating impact on volunteering, which is an important area of our social and community life. The cloud of suspicion can only grow to reach everybody who works within the community; particularly those who wish to help the most vulnerable. It is the fear of informal activities that is a new phenomenon as it has spread even to people who have in the past championed and worked within the community. We seem unable to let go of the thought that someone amongst us may be a pervert and have even taken onboard the notion that we ourselves are somehow susceptible to this and need to redeem ourselves through constant checks and surveillance. We more and more now see others as dangerous, we assess each other with suspicion and, just as damagingly, we have taken onboard a belief that we cannot judge for ourselves potential or real dangers – that this is somehow beyond our ability and can only be performed by the bureaucratic procedure of CRB checks. This is bizarrely out of touch with how we live our lives; thankfully even the people who vehemently believe in vetting and trust in bureaucracy don't vet their own lives and do allow their children to build relationships with their neighbours without vetting them. Although, sadly, perhaps even this is changing.

The idea that it may save one child's life is dangerous. Firstly, it is not a response to real risks or real changes in our society. Our society isn't any more dangerous than before, so our response is disproportionate to the risk. Secondly, there is no evidence to suggest that there is more abuse happening, or that we are in more danger than ever before. In fact, figures show that abuse is on the decline, even though the definition of abuse is widening. The way we currently respond to the very rare and tragic cases of abuse corrodes the very relationships that mean we take joint responsibility for looking out for each other. There have been countless anecdotes of men walking away from situations where before they may have helped, because they were worried of what people may think. We not only view others as potential abusers but we also have a diminished belief of our own abilities to judge, take appropriate action and cope, which in turn weakens the collective activities that bring us together. Once we decide that the only responsible course of action is to look to the authorities to tell us who to trust, instead of trusting in our own capacity and power to make these judgements, we become estranged from each other, we feel we can no longer help each other, we feel awkward with each other. This will not help keep us safe.

Viewing other people as potentially dangerous, as a threat we need protection from, is ludicrous and dangerous and is breaking down the already delicate fabric of our society. There is a difference between those few who harm and the majority who wish to help; our intentions are everything but are missed when we cast everybody in the same negative light. We should remember that the motivation to volunteer, to help others who need it, is a positive one.

#### **4. Building and strengthening communities**

One of the reasons for the formalisation of volunteering is a redefinition of what volunteering is. Volunteering can bring rewards for the volunteer. Volunteers pick up skills, gain experience, meet new people and, for some, develop a sense of themselves that they didn't have before. But as mentioned earlier, all the surveys on volunteering have found that people volunteer because they want to help where help is needed. But now volunteering is seen as a cure for society's ills rather than as a way of filling a gap

or need via basic human solidarity. This was highlighted in the Commission on the Future of Volunteering report *Manifesto for Change*. But despite its laudable title it does little to challenge this new direction.

Now volunteering is not about providing a good service to others but rather is an instrumental means of curing social problems. The government wants volunteering to provide social cohesion, a reduction in crime, the socially excluded with something to do, awareness about healthy eating, an antidote to antisocial behaviour, good citizens for the voting booths, skills and experience for the labour market, a cleaner environment and more. In fact the list grows by the day. It appears that volunteering – and indeed the voluntary sector – is being used more and more as a means to achieve policies and, rather than fight this, many of us take the meaningless jargon such as diversity, participation and social exclusion as incontrovertible common sense. Whilst accessing funds to train and support volunteers can be beneficial, the fact these resources are tied to a policy agenda needs to change.

The bureaucracy for maintaining this approach is huge and whilst cash injections are given to keep the show on the road, little resources are provided that could really make a difference. Instead time and resources are poured into individual personal development plans to map (or check) volunteers' progress towards becoming a good citizen. At no point are volunteers asked whether cleaning up green spaces, recycling or sitting on committees as representatives ticks their own box – these decisions are made elsewhere. All we are asked to do is implement them. The focus is to train volunteers as citizens and consumers rather than people who can produce and do great things. This is a diminished view of who we are and what we can achieve. These are nothing more than behaviour modification programmes that make a mockery of campaigning for real social change, which often means challenging policies. Perhaps it is the politicians and policymakers who are in fact “socially excluded”, since policies suggest they are out of touch, fearful of the public, distrusting of the voluntary sector and lack vision to inspire and lead to bring about change.

We risk losing the transformative effect volunteering has due to its essential ingredients: its informal and spontaneous nature and its independence from policymakers. Following an agreed set agenda will suck the life out of volunteering. We need to decide what the purpose of volunteering is. Is it a tool for policymakers, a personal development programme for individuals, or is it simply about people getting together to shape their world as they see fit?

### **Conclusion**

Many of us can remember a time when we helped out without being monitored, a time where there wasn't a copious amount of form filling or fitting tight boxes, and the world didn't fall apart. It is possible to do it differently. Challenging those who think people need to be coerced or coaxed to volunteer is a start, but ultimately we must restore our own belief in our ability to get on with it and support the fact that people unite out of common concern.