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Factors and motivations contributing to community volunteers' participation in a nursery feeding project in Malawi

Isabelle Wazo Uny

This article reports on a study to explore the factors and motivations that contribute to community volunteers' participation in a nursery feeding project in Malawi. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community volunteers in 14 of the 32 sites in the programme. The findings pointed to a mix of intrinsic motivations, namely a deep concern for orphans and vulnerable children, a moral obligation to help, and a declared love of the work undertaken, and also to external factors such as spirituality, links of reciprocity, and the building of social capital. Understanding what motivates volunteers to take part in resource-poor settings is crucial to recognising, facilitating, and sustaining the work that they do. Further research into volunteering in the South is crucially needed.

KEY WORDS: Social Sector; Civil Society; Aid; Sub-Saharan Africa

Introduction

Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world, one that is severely affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. It has nearly one million orphans. It has been plagued by food insecurity thought to be an aggregate of over-cultivation; small plot sizes; reliance on a single crop (maize), and the use of hybrid seeds and fertilisers; lack of foreign investment; and the impact of HIV and AIDS (Cammack *et al.* 2003; Charman 2004; Orr *et al.* 2007). In this context, school feeding programmes (SFPs) have been hailed as an ideal solution, especially for infants for whom malnutrition can impair brain and physical development and later affect access to schooling and academic performance (Alderman *et al.* 2006; Levinger 1994).

School feeding programmes (SFPs) have been in place around the world for more than 50 years, and thorough guidelines have been developed to increase their effectiveness, both for nutrition and for learning (INEE 2006; UNESCO 2004). Certain steps can be taken to make SFPs more sustainable, such as ensuring that the food is home-grown, and using maintainable infrastructures (WFP 2000); but by far the most important factor which makes these programmes sustainable is community involvement, and particularly community participation (LINKAGES 2002; Surayia *et al.* 2003; Tontisirin and Gillespie 1999).

Nutrition programmes see community volunteers' participation as crucial but they are not particularly concerned with questions such as the identities of the community volunteers, how are they perceived in their community, what their motives are, and what volunteering means to them.

The main characteristics of volunteers worldwide are that they take part in an activity of their own free will and for no remuneration. Although much research has been conducted in the North about volunteering, less attention has been paid to voluntarism in developing countries. Yet increasingly NGOs and development projects – including SFPs – rely on volunteers to carry out their work. This is partly because they are eager to foster participation and empowerment, and partly to cut costs and increase efficiency through the use of local knowledge and experience. This practice raises a major concern of interest to this study, namely that in some cases volunteering risks increasing the burden of those in the society already struggling to survive and to care for their own. Thus, whereas for agencies and NGOs the use of volunteers may still be an efficient way of getting things done, for the volunteers themselves participating may have a totally different meaning, especially if they are women or mothers, and particularly in the context of HIV and AIDS and the orphans that the epidemic creates. This study aims to understand why people – particularly women – living in extremely difficult conditions do give their time and effort for the benefit of others for no remuneration.

The Mary's Meals nursery feeding programme in Blantyre

The Mary's Meals school feeding programme (MMSFP) first began in Malawi in 2002. It is funded by the charity Scottish International Relief (SIR), registered in both Scotland and Malawi. Today it feeds more than 100,000 children in southern Malawi in primary and nursery schools, throughout the urban and rural Blantyre area. Supported by limited numbers of paid staff, the daily task of preparing and serving meals is carried out by nearly 3000 volunteers from the local communities, who organise cooking rotas, prepare the food, and look after the food stores. MMSFP provides the staple foodstuff (*Likuni Phala* or LP, a local maize porridge fortified with vitamins), cooking stoves, and utensils and helps to build shelters for learning and food storage.

In the nurseries, teams of regular volunteers (usually three to five people) spend eight hours daily at the centre to provide food and learning opportunities for the children. The recipients, most of whom are orphans and vulnerable children, are given two meals a day and are regularly visited by a nurse employed by the project. Nursery volunteers are trained in early childhood development, and at nursery the children receive an introduction to education that is intended to encourage later enrolment in primary school. It is in the nurseries/ community-based child-care centres (CBCCs) that this research was conducted, because that is where the longest-serving, most committed volunteers were to be found.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews with volunteers were conducted *in situ* in 14 of the programme's 32 CBCCs. All of the participants were female, and indeed all but a couple of the volunteers in the 32 nurseries are women. Purposive sampling was adopted. The interviewees were those who had volunteered for one year or more, as the goal was to study what sustained their long-term motivation. There were no other criteria for taking part. The number of years served by the volunteers interviewed spanned from one to nine and averaged four years. Interviews were conducted in Chichewa, the local language, with the help of an experienced Malawian research assistant; interviews were recorded and transcribed into English on the same day by

the same team. A daily diary was kept by the researcher, and broad preliminary analysis was conducted in the field. Ethical approval had been obtained from Queen Margaret University and from SIR prior to departure for Malawi, and the participants' consent (including consent to record the interview) was also sought. Confidentiality and anonymity were respected at all times, and in this article the volunteers are referred to as *V1*, *V2*, *V3*, etc.

Upon return, a phenomenological analysis was carried out on the 14 interview transcripts. This methodology was chosen because it is particularly concerned with 'the participant's view of the topic under investigation' (Smith *et al.* 1999: 218). This type of analysis is a lengthy and multi-layered process which requires close and repeated reading of each transcript, in order to arrive at an adequate reduction and interpretation of data. The process is conducted with each transcript individually, 'suspending (bracketing) as much as possible the researcher's meaning and interpretations and entering into the world of the unique individual who was interviewed' (Hycner 1985: 281). Later, all themes from all transcripts are brought together and clustered, while continually checking interpretations against actual data, and remaining open to contradictory and diverging themes. Finally, a visual representation of the themes index is drafted to allow for easier linking of the data, which is crucial for writing up the findings (Hycner 1985; Smith and Osborn 2003). In order to reach a deeper understanding and to add breadth to the analysis, notes from a series of formal and informal discussions with key informants, as well as from observations made by the researcher, were also used in the analysis.

Results

For the sake of presentation, the themes are organised around a series of four main motivations (the reason behind one's action or behaviour), and three main factors (circumstance, fact, or influence that contributes to one's action). Figure 1 is a visual representation of the main themes explored: the way in which they operate on both community and personal levels, and cluster, link, and mutually reinforce one another.

Motivation 1: It touches me so much

In Malawi, the orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) are the volunteers' lens on poverty. Their concerns are primarily about them, and it is because of them that they volunteer. Indeed, 12 of the 14 participants stated their concerns for the children as the main reason for their volunteering; they were particularly worried about the number of OVC going hungry or neglected, and the need for them to have a normal childhood and to learn:

'Taking into consideration the HIV-AIDS, it touches me so much. What touches me most is that my friends' children are suffering . . . it touches me that when I take care of the children, I can play with them so that they forget little by little.' (V3)

'I was concerned for the future of the children and that is why I volunteered.' (V6)

'I can't leave those children who are suffering. We are supposed to work and help the children so they grow up well, like ours. We may not be able to raise them the same, but at least we can make it better.' (V13)

From their interaction with the OVC and when talking to them, it was obvious that the volunteers loved the children, and indeed they often described the motor of their volunteering as the heart.

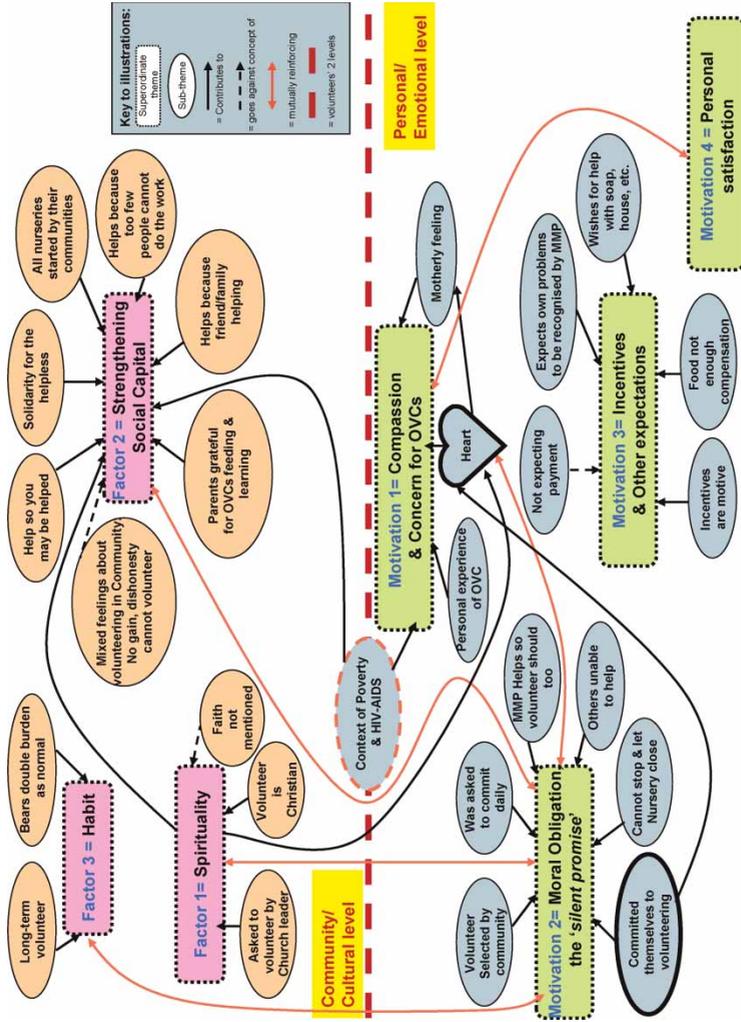


Figure 1: Factors influencing community voluntary work

'We vowed, and with the "heart that feels sorry", we are used to it, and we don't think we are having problems.' (V2)

'We have it in our heart that we do not want to leave our friends' children.' (V3)

'I volunteered with all my heart. I cannot stop for no reason.' (V10)

'What made me start was just love. I just thought things were not all right if I was asked to come and help, so I went there with all my heart.' (V11)

As Figure 1 shows, the concept of the heart is not simply the locus of the compassion that drives the volunteers to take part, it is also what they give to their volunteering, in a silent promise that cannot be broken. This vow to help, as the next section indicates, is a major motivation for the volunteers; it has significant implications for the way in which they conceptualise and experience their volunteering.

Motivation 2: To stop? It's not possible

The sense of obligation expressed by the participants *vis-à-vis* their volunteering was striking. The phrase '*I volunteered*' assumed a different weight, sounding like a reason in itself, an act at once voluntary and binding:

'I volunteered to work for the orphans, nobody forced me, I wanted do it on my own, so I can see that there is no end.' (V1)

The kind of commitment and obligation involved in volunteering became particularly tangible when 13 of the 14 volunteers said that either their volunteer work had '*no end*' or that they would keep doing it until they died. Volunteering, in the mind of those participants, is binding, a kind of moral obligation. In time, the researcher came to refer to the volunteers' vow as a 'silent promise', a promise so strong that it could not be broken, despite the fact that MMSFP staff explained to the researcher that they had repeatedly told the volunteers that this was a voluntary commitment and that they could leave the work at any point if it became too burdensome.

Motivation 3: We do not expect anything

The compensations given by MMSFP to the volunteers for their work were 50 kg of maize per month, some training, a *chitenje* (a piece of fabric worn over a woman's skirt to serve as an apron, a basket, a baby-carrier, etc.), and the opportunity to take their children to the nursery (and/or the adjacent primary school where MMSFP also ran a feeding programme). However, only one of the 14 participants stated that the help received from MMSFP was her reason for volunteering. All the others stressed that they did not expect payment. In fact, it emerged that the help that volunteers expected from MMSFP was often not of a monetary nature. They were asking for recognition and a gesture of goodwill from MMSFP for their volunteering, that is to say in-kind help that would ease their personal problems and enable them to '*work even harder*' (V6).

Motivation 4: I love the work

The last motivation is the satisfaction that participants derived from their work. Four of the 14 volunteers explicitly said they loved their work and enjoyed the contact with the children. The women took pleasure in seeing OVC get better, play, and forget their troubles.

Factor 1: We work in spiritual life

As expected from the literature review, spirituality was a major factor explaining why these women volunteer to help children in need. Of course the fact that MMSFP is of Catholic orientation and that four of the volunteers were originally asked to volunteer by their church or church leader is significant. But for the nine of the remaining 10 who had volunteered of their own accord, spirituality was also an underlying factor:

'I saw that volunteering is one way of doing my work for the Lord.' (V4)

'What we started, we have to finish, so we can see how God is going to bless us.' (V7)

'Because we volunteer to do this work, God blesses us.' (V13)

Factor 2: I may also leave orphans, so my friends may also take care of them

Some of the factors influencing volunteers' actions were obviously linked to the building of social capital within their communities. Social capital has many definitions but in this article it is understood to be:

The rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity and trust embedded in social relations, social structures and society's institutional arrangements which enable members to achieve their individual and community objectives. Social capital is embedded in social structure and has public good characteristics. (Narayan 1997)

Nine of the 14 participants invoked notions of solidarity and reciprocity. For them, volunteering was regarded as a kind of safety-net investment: they said they were helping because one day they or their family might need the same help and they hoped it would be given:

'I saw that it was a good thing to do this work to help the children in the village, because I thought it may affect me also in the future, that I might also need help from friends, so I thought I should help, so that in future, if people help me, it won't be a hassle to them either, and they should also help my children.' (V9)

For some of the women, volunteering had also reinforced their own position or status in the community, although volunteering was not always seen as something worthy. There was conflict as well as trust, and the participants also alluded to various problems and mixed feelings regarding their work.

Factor 3: We are used to it

The last factor relates simply to that of habit. It became evident when eight of the participants stated that they were *'used to'* their voluntary work. This was partly because some of them had volunteered for so long, and partly because in Malawian culture women are responsible for most of the caring activities. Their multiple roles must be taken into account in projects like MMSFP, which rely mainly on women volunteers. In most cases the women interviewed said they just bore it all, but this is not to say that balancing all roles was easy; in fact, 11 of the volunteers interviewed expressed a tension or conflict in fulfilling both domestic and community roles, because there was not enough time for both. However, they added that since they had made a commitment to volunteering, it was their household duties that must suffer. In some cases, they even went as far as to choose their volunteering over their marriage:

'Those days I could have said I should stop have passed, because even my husband was asking me to choose. "You came here to get married, but you are not doing any household activities, you are busy doing those things! At the end of the month, money is needed at home for things like the maize mill", he asked me: "you have to choose one of the two things!", and my family was almost divorced, but I told him that, you don't know the secret God has put to this. Maybe it is just God's wish for me to do this, and I will continue until the future, I don't know when I will end, when the time comes.' (V2)

These are serious implications, which give a clear idea of the strength of the personal obligation that the volunteers feel. This vow is compounded by many linked factors and motivations, but it is as binding as a contract.

This conceptualisation of volunteering is very different from that of volunteering in the North. It must be properly understood if volunteers in development programmes are to be recognised and adequately supported in the future.

Discussion

This study focused on the under-researched area of what motivates community volunteers to participate in nursery feeding projects in burden-high, resource-poor settings. The phenomenological analysis found a series of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and factors consistent with findings in other studies. The main finding – that volunteers (particularly women) give their time and effort out of their concern for others in greater need than they are themselves – echoes the findings of Kironde and Klassen (2002) regarding lay volunteers working in tuberculosis-control programmes in South Africa, and those concerning community carers in similar programmes in Malawi and Zambia (Hobday 2005; Mkandawire and Muula 2005). All studies reviewed by the author found truly altruistic motivations, but also motivation driven by bonds of reciprocity (Hobday 2005; Moleni and Gallagher 2006). Whether volunteers were positively or negatively regarded in their communities, they continued their work in order to help others. This selflessness is of course compounded, in Malawi as elsewhere, by spirituality, and Mkandawire and Muula (2005: 22), for example, also report that care givers say that 'the benefits of being a CCG [community care giver] [are] not material here on earth but rather spiritual in heaven'.

However, this research is unique in showing the merging of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and factors – compassion, concern, habit, social networks, personal satisfaction, and spirituality – into a personal obligation, a 'silent promise' lodged in the heart of the volunteer, which, from her perspective, cannot be broken, no matter what difficulties she faces or what sacrifices she has to make. This helps us to understand what a woman in Malawi means when she says '*I volunteered*', when she talks of how touched she is by the plight of her community's orphans, when she voices her lack of hope in the future, or the need for greater solidarity. It exemplifies how, despite their own burdens and difficulties, these women continue to make considerable contributions to the community in terms of their time and labour. Unless agencies, NGOs, and development practitioners understand what this means, they not only risk underestimating the burden of those whom they most wish to involve, they may also let compassion, spirituality, and moral obligation turn community participants into lifetime volunteers who may become increasingly dependent on their project – an outcome which would conflict with the ultimate goal of participation as a motor for empowerment and social change.

Conclusions

Volunteering in the South is not a pastime but, as the volunteers in this study stated, *nchito* (work). In the CBCC where the interviews took place, the researcher found volunteers giving eight hours a day, five days a week, over sustained periods of time. This is in no way peculiar to that programme and points to a potential 'institutionalisation' of volunteering, which, although of great benefit to the community, may both threaten the long-term sustainability of development programmes and increase volunteers' dependency on them. Since we know that, over time, it is the way in which people started their volunteering, the decision they made to continue, and the way they feel about their volunteering that will sustain their commitment (Penner 2002), it is therefore crucial not only that volunteers should enjoy their work and feel valued, but also that they be able to balance their work and their own lives.

For some time there has been a growing demand to offer more compensation to those who volunteer in the South, particularly as they are often as poor as those they serve. The researcher agrees that such compensation should include '[the] development of skills, educational credits or scholarships, community recognition, provision of information and facilitation, support via training, supervision, reflection sessions and mentoring, and development of social connection' (Moleni and Gallagher 2006: 11).

On the one hand, the fact that the women interviewed in this study felt they were making a difference in their community, loved their work, expressed a sense of ownership about the nurseries, and felt they were working together with the programme towards a common goal for the overall development of Malawi was a very positive sign of empowerment. On the other hand, the fact that there were so few volunteers in the nurseries, committing their hearts and most of their time to the work, and feeling divided because of doing so, was also worrying. Given the scarcity of studies on volunteering in Malawi and elsewhere in the South, it is crucial to encourage further research.

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