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Policy review

Volunteering and the Sustainable Development Goals: An opportunity to move beyond boundaries

Angela Ellis Paine, Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham, UK

Benjamin J. Lough University of Illinois at Urbana Campaign, USA

Cliff Allum, Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham, UK

Danielle Beswick, International Development Department, University of Birmingham, UK

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Abstract

There is growing recognition of the role that volunteering can play in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Evidence of its contribution, however, remains relatively weak, including for countries in the Global North such as the UK. This is compounded by limited collaboration between those concerned with volunteering and with development. The SDGs provide an opportunity to bring together research, policy and practice on volunteering and development, on international and 'domestic' volunteering, enabling valuable inter-disciplinary learning.

Key words:

Sustainable Development Goals, volunteering, development, distinctive contribution

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Agenda 2030 and Volunteering

“Volunteerism is a global phenomenon that transcends boundaries, religions and cultural divides. Volunteers embody the fundamental values of commitment, inclusiveness, civic engagement and a sense of solidarity [...] The newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals offer another opportunity for individuals to show solidarity through volunteerism. All of us can contribute to realizing the 2030 Agenda’s vision of ending poverty” (UN Secretary-General, 2015)

The United Nations Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030) was adopted by UN member states in 2015 (UN General Assembly resolution 70/1). In response, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) worked together with other actors in the development community to set 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 associated targets. The SDGs aim to tackle several enduring challenges, including poverty, hunger, health, education, gender inequality, water, sanitation, energy, environment and social justice by 2030. Their coverage is global and ambitious:

“The 2030 Agenda is **transformative, universal** and inclusive in nature, **its application to all countries and stakeholders** and its moto is to **leave no one behind**. It embeds strong linkage with **peace, security, human rights, justice and good governance** and underlines the fundamental nature of wide and diverse **partnerships** to deliver on its goals” (UNV, 2016: 3, emphasis in original)

By signing up to Agenda 2030 the UK government committed to achieving the goals domestically (in the UK) and working with others to achieve them internationally. The UK government’s approach places overarching responsibility for the implementation of, and reporting on, the SDGs with the Department for International Development (DfID), with an expectation that DfID will coordinate efforts across all other central government departments. Identifying DfID as the lead department suggests the emphasis may be more on the achievement of the SDGs internationally, rather than in the UK. Indeed responses to the UK government’s approach to the achievement of the SDGs domestically have, to date, been largely critical, questioning its adequacy (e.g. UKSSD, 2018) ¹. This is particularly concerning in the context of high levels of inequality, child poverty, food insecurity, homelessness and loneliness currently being experienced within the UK (e.g. Alston, 2018).

There are, however, differences in approaches to implementation across the UK. In Wales, for example, the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act* of 2015 legislates for seven areas of well-being, which are closely linked to the SDGs, providing a legislative framework for their implementation. In Scotland, the National Performance Framework – which was

¹ See also <https://www.ukssd.co.uk/news/government-is-failing-to-tackle-hunger-in-the-uk>; <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2018/03/what-do-the-governments-departmental-plans-tell-us-about-the-sdgs> both accessed 01.04.19

enshrined in legislation through the *Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act* of 2015 - effectively incorporates the SDGs into its plans to reduce inequality, increase well-being and create sustainable, inclusive growth. There is no legislative equivalent in England or Northern Ireland. Instead, in Northern Ireland, sustainable economic, social and environmental development is incorporated within the Northern Ireland Civil Service Strategic Plans. Similarly, for England, each central government department must ensure that they embed the SDGs into their ongoing activities through their departmental planning process²: this could be seen as an effective way of embedding SDGs into domestic policy, or as a way of sidestepping them.

Looking beyond government, integral to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs is the engagement of citizens, including through volunteering: *“the 2030 Agenda explicitly names volunteer groups as actors in their own right among the means of implementation”* (UNV, 2016: 6). The UN has a long-standing interest in the contribution of volunteering to development: the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), for example, was founded in 1970 to contribute to peace and development through volunteering, while 2001 was designated the UN’s International Year of Volunteers (Ellis, Kendall and Baglioni, 2009). In December 2012, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution by consensus (resolution 67/138) emphasizing the importance of volunteering to the achievement of poverty reduction and other sustainable development objectives. The resolution tasked development actors generally and UNV specifically to develop a Plan of Action to better integrate volunteering into peace and development

The most recent report of the UN Secretary-General covering the Plan of Action, submitted in July 2018, focused explicitly on how to integrate volunteering into Agenda 2030 (A/73/254). The report, together with resolution 70/129, specifically articulated that stronger commitments were needed from academics, among others, to *“ensure that the differentiated impact of volunteers on the implementation of the [SDGs] is documented”* (UNGA A/RES/70/129, 2016, para 15).

Within the remainder of this article, we support this call by highlighting the opportunities that exist for reporting on the contribution of volunteering to the SDGs. While there is a growing recognition of the contribution that volunteering can make to the SDGs, the emphasis has tended to be on international volunteering and to a lesser extent ‘domestic’ volunteering in the Global South, rather than ‘domestic’ volunteering in the Global North, including the UK. While this has begun to shift, we suggest that evidence of volunteering’s contribution to the SDGs remains relatively weak, largely limited to reporting the scale of volunteering rather than its outcomes (Devereux et al, 2017; Haddock and Devereux, 2016)

² Each department must produce a Single Departmental Plan:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/a-country-that-works-for-everyone-the-governments-plan>)

This, we suggest, is in part due to insufficient collaboration between those concerned with volunteering and those concerned with development, and between those concerned with international volunteering and those concerned with ‘domestic’ volunteering. The implementation of, and interest stimulated by, the SDGs provides an opportunity to bring together policy, practice and research on domestic and international volunteering and on volunteering and development. Enriched collaborations would enable valuable interdisciplinary learning.

Opportunities for reporting the contribution of volunteering to the SDGs

Every few years, each UN member country submits a Voluntary National Review (VNR), which documents that country’s contribution to the SDGs. In 2018, UNV undertook a review of existing VNR documents and found that: *“in 2018, 29 reporting countries (over 60%) mentioned volunteers in their reviews - increasing from 17 (40%) in 2017 and 2 (9%) in the first round in 2016”* (UNV, 2018). The review found that volunteering was generally included as a cross-cutting means of implementing the SDGs and acknowledged it as an important resource for peace and development, and as a means of engaging people who would otherwise be ‘left behind’. Unusually, Australia had included a whole section on ‘volunteers for the SDGs’ providing national figures for volunteer numbers, hours and ‘value’, estimating that the economic and social contribution of volunteers in Australia equates to \$290 billion a year. The contribution of volunteering to specific SDGs, most often in terms of enhancing gender equality and social inclusion, was also noted in a number of Reviews; while some listed volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations as leading multi-stakeholder consultations associated with the Review.

The UK was one of approximately 50 countries to submit its first VNR in 2019. Coordinated and drafted by DfID, with support from the Cabinet Office and other departments, and underpinned by data from the Office of National Statistics³ (ONS), it details the UK’s progress towards the SDGs both domestically and internationally. Attempts were made to engage with stakeholders to inform the VNR, including a series of consultative meetings hosted by DfID, and a UK Government website set up to enable people to share information about projects that contribute to the UK’s delivery of the SDGs. Complementing the ONS quantitative measures of progress, the submissions offered the potential to provide case studies of individual projects, organisations and activities. The final report, submitted June 2019, brings together quantitative data on progress towards the SDGs with qualitative examples of individual activities and initiatives (HM Government 2019). Despite concerns raised by groups such as the House of Commons’ International Development Committee⁴

³The Office for National Statistics has responsibility for reporting on UK data against each of the goals and has developed a sophisticated Data Platform to facilitate this

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/programmesandprojects/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>

⁴ E.g. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/international-development-committee/news-parliament-2017/sustainable-development-goals-launch-17-19/>

and the Environmental Audit Committee⁵ about DfID's leadership of SDG implementation in general and its approach to the production of the VNR more specifically (and despite the authors' own concerns about the apparent absence of volunteering in discussions during the consultation period), the UK's VNR report could be seen as broadly encouraging as far as volunteering is concerned. The 235 page report mentions the word 'volunteer/volunteering' 30 times (39, if including references). The introductory chapter notes that *"volunteers are making a critical contribution to the delivery of the goals and there is a growing recognition of the importance of volunteers for development outcomes, including the Goals"* (p13), and then goes on to comment on the scale of volunteering in the UK, relative to other countries. Volunteers, or volunteering, are then mentioned in sections dealing with seven of the Goals: poverty; quality education; industry, innovation and infrastructure; sustainable cities and communities; life below water; peace, justice and stronger institutions; and partnerships. While this is an encouraging sign, evidence is on the whole limited to short case study examples, with an emphasis on outputs (volunteer numbers and time) rather than outcomes (what difference those volunteers actually make to individual SDGs).

A more thorough consideration of the contribution of volunteering to the SDGs could act as a valuable vehicle for greater coordination of the volunteering evidence base across the UK. A 'National Situational Analysis' on volunteering compiled by NCVO and its sister organisations, to feed into the work of UNV on volunteering and the SDGs and shared with the authors⁶, highlighted the devolved nature of volunteering research, policy and practice across the UK and the challenges that this presents for UK-wide collaboration and reporting, particularly when looking at evidence which goes beyond levels of participation. While *Understanding Society*⁷ provides trend data on levels of volunteering across the UK, it is limited in its scope. The Situational Analysis noted that in Scotland a Volunteering Outcomes Framework has been developed, rooted in the previously mentioned National Performance Framework, evidencing the role volunteering plays in ensuring the wellbeing of individuals and communities in Scotland. In Wales, one of the 44 National Indicators put in place to measure progress against the seven well-being goals is volunteering. The Analysis did not identify any comparable measures in England or Northern Ireland.

Identifying comparable, UK-wide evidence on the outcomes of volunteering is, therefore, challenging and on volunteering's contribution to the SDGs particularly so. There are existing, more localised, studies which could be drawn on to indicate the scale and contribution of volunteering to the achievement of individual SDGs in the UK, in the lieu of research designed specifically to assess it. For example, although the introduction section of

⁵ E.g. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/sustainable-development-goals-follow-up-17-19/>

⁶ For details of UNV's National Situational Analysis process, see <https://www.unv.org/basic-page/national-situation-analysis>

⁷ <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

the VNR refers to a study by the Kings Fund (Galea et al, 2013) which reported that over 3 million people volunteer to support health and social care organisations, including 78,000 volunteering for acute healthcare trusts in England, together contributing over 13 million hours a year (p14), there is no specific mentioning of volunteering within the SDG3 – *good health and well-being* – section. Reference could also have been made here to the 5 million people who volunteer for organisations within the field of sports and exercise (Low et al, 2007), arguably also directly contributing to the health and well-being agenda. Beyond these figures on the scale of volunteering, however, some evidence is also available on health and well-being related outcomes, for volunteers and/or their beneficiaries. Volunteering has, for example, been reported to have a positive impact on subjective well-being (e.g. Binder and Freytag, 2013), physical health (e.g. Casiday et al, 2008), and mental well-being (e.g. Tabassum, Mohan and Smith, 2016). Similarly, the section of the VNR that reports on progress against SDG4 – *quality education* – mentions the 29,000 business volunteers who have reached over 277,000 young people to provide help with employability and enterprise, various youth engagement programmes, and the International Citizen Service scheme which has supported 36,000 young volunteers to get involved in sustainable development projects (p72). It could also have referred to the 250,000 people involved as school governors and trustees (NGA, 2018), alongside the many more who are involved in other school-based roles such as supporting class-based activities and fundraising (Body et al, 2017), as well as supporting formal and informal educational activities through charities (including the growing number of volunteers now running libraries across England, CIPFA, 2013). There is also some evidence on the educational outcomes of volunteering, particularly for the volunteers themselves: it has, for example, been found to contribute to hard and soft skills and can, in some cases, lead to qualifications (e.g. Nichols and Ralston, 2011). There is, however, also evidence of the limitations of volunteering in education, not least its uneven distribution which can exacerbate rather than enhance inequalities (Body et al, 2017).

However, whilst there is evidence available on the outcomes of volunteering that could be drawn upon, it has limitations. Existing evidence tends to rely on cross-sectional and often self-reported studies (Kamerade, 2015) and tends to focus more on outcomes for the volunteers themselves rather than for others. Further, existing evidence tends to suggest that positive outcomes depends on circumstances, including volunteer demographics, role, duration and support, but is often not sophisticated enough to more specific.

Understanding the distinctive contribution of volunteering

In addition to understanding the broad contribution of volunteering to the SDGs, the UNGA has asked for a consideration of its *distinctive* contributions to peace and development: for evidence of what volunteers can do that other institutions, governments or private sector organisations cannot. Volunteering in the UK is typically not explicitly framed in terms of ‘development’ ambitions, and it is relatively rare for research on volunteering in the UK to specifically consider its contribution to ‘*peace and development*’ (with perhaps the

exception of some literature on the role of civil society in peace processes in Northern Ireland, e.g. Knox, 2011), let alone its '*distinctive*' contribution to these outcomes. We are more used to thinking about the contribution of volunteering to narrower, UK-policy orientated, outcomes such as employability.

Moving beyond evidence of the outcomes of volunteering to identify its *distinctive* contribution is an important next step, and here we suggest opportunities for valuable interdisciplinary learning. To date, there has been limited cross over between those who study volunteering and those who study development. Studies that have emerged on the interface of international and domestic volunteering tend to be limited in scope, focusing on the cross-over between national and international volunteers (e.g. Kelly and Case; McBride and Lough, 2010). 'Volunteering for development' (V4D) has emerged as a distinct concept over the past decade from within the disciplines of geography, social policy and development studies (see for example, Burns, et al. 2015; Davis Smith, 2000; Lough et al. 2018a; Patel et al. 2007), but to date has focused almost exclusively on volunteering by those from the Global North in the Global South, with little or any consideration for South-South volunteering or for how it applies to volunteering in countries in the Global North such as the UK. There is, however, a growing momentum, around the world, to connect these different conversations (see Lough et al, 2018a).

Working within the frame of V4D, UNV (2018) has suggested that one distinctive strength of volunteering is its ability to engage and provide support for marginalised or vulnerable groups who are often reluctant to, or unable to, engage with formal state services. This suggests an important role for volunteering within efforts globally, but also specifically within the UK, to ensure that the SDGs "leave no one behind" (DfID, 2017). Elsewhere, Lough (2019) suggests several areas of added value from volunteering over other forms of development such as providing avenues for self-organisation, strengthening social cohesion, enhancing trust and facilitating relational connectivity and networking. The relational nature of volunteering was also highlighted in a large-scale study of volunteering and development undertaken by the Institute for Development Studies on behalf of VSO (Burns et al, 2015). The relational nature of volunteering, they suggest, facilitates a people centred approach in which agency and ownership are key. Through being embedded within local communities, volunteers become trusted 'development actors' which aids access to services amongst the poorest and most marginalised and builds social capital, community solidarity and resilience. The 2018 *State of the World Volunteerism* report further emphasised the unique relational nature of volunteering and how this supports development (Lough et al, 2018b). The 2015 *State of the World Volunteerism* report highlighted volunteering's contribution to civic engagement and good governance (Mukwashi, 2015). These broader, distinctive, contributions of volunteering to development feel particularly pertinent to the UK in the current context of growing inequality and need.

There is, however, a need to be careful not to overstate the role of volunteers or to offer them as a substitute to a retreating state: volunteering alone is unable to address these intractable issues. Indeed, as well as recognising what volunteering can do, we also need to recognise its limits. Any volunteering – national and international, volunteering for development and volunteering for any other motivation or outcome, formal and informal – can be subject to issues of power, access and inequality. Such issues are more explicitly recognised and acknowledged in the writing and thinking about international volunteering, but same issues play out on the domestic field (see for example Holdsworth and Quinn, 2012 and Body, 2017). Those with the greatest resources (e.g. time, finance, education) and ‘dominant status’ are generally the most likely to volunteer (formally, within organizations, at least) (Lee and Brudney, 2012; Mitani, 2014). Volunteering can exacerbate and well as reduce inequalities. As Lough et al (2018b) note, support is critical to outcomes: poorly organised and supported volunteering can lead to negative as well as positive outcomes (see also Diprose, 2012).

Conclusion: An opportunity for collaboration and learning

Volunteering can contribute to sustainable development in different way, including through campaigning for change, holding governments to account and supporting service delivery. The SDGs represent one visible opportunity to recognise, validate and enhance this contribution, but (importantly) also to recognise its limitations. This also has the potential to bring together different fields of research, policy and practice, which have tended to work in silos. Enhanced collaboration could help to improve both the theory and evidence on volunteering, while also improving policy and practice. It could, for example, help move beyond the tendency for UK based researchers and policy makers to focus on organisational forms of volunteering, on volunteering as a means of people becoming ‘responsible actors’ in their own development, while neglecting more informal, mutual-aid and self-help (Burns et al, 2015) and activism, campaigning and advocacy. These more diverse forms and expressions of volunteering may prove to be particularly important in the context of the SDGs, in terms of holding government to account over the delivery of the SDGs and challenging some of the political projects that are contributing to the problems in the first place. It could also help to identify not just the distinctive contribution of volunteering, but also the limits of what we can expect it to accomplish.

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The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest

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