

CEV is collaborating with Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) to publish a series of articles on volunteering-related topics in English. The articles will cover a broad range of topics and versions of the articles have been previously published in Dutch.

June 2021

### Volunteering: A modern perception

In 1996 Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth conceptualized the term “volunteer(ing)”. Their quest into the widespread definitions of volunteering in use is nowadays one of the most cited studies in volunteering. They show that definitions of volunteering are based on four key dimensions: (1) amount of free choice; (2) degree of organization or structure; (3) kind of remuneration; and (4) the intended beneficiaries.

Based on these dimensions Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth show that a continuum of volunteering can be created between volunteering in its purest form towards volunteering in its broadest form (See table 1). One end of this continuum contains volunteering in its purest form; that is a volunteering act performed 1) out of free will, 2) at a formal organization 3) without remuneration and 4) for the benefit of strangers. On the opposite end of the spectrum is volunteering in its broadest form; that is the act of volunteering performed with 1) an implied coercion, 2) in an informal setting, 3) that is compensated, and 4) entails a personal benefit.

	<b>Component of the perception</b>	<b>Pure interpretation</b>	<b>Broad interpretation</b>
<b>Amount of free choice</b>	The ability to voluntarily choose	Relatively uncoerced	Obligation to volunteer
<b>Degree of organization</b>		Formal	Informal
<b>Kind of Remuneration</b>	None at all	None expected / expenses reimbursed	Stipend / low pay
<b>Intended beneficiaries</b>	Strangers	Friends or relatives	Oneself (as well)

Table 1. Continuum of volunteering perceptions (Based upon Cnaan et al., 1996).

Following Cnaan and colleagues (1996), two comparative international studies by Handy et al. (2000) and Meijs et al., (2003) show that around the world people have an implicit high net-cost perception (high effort, no remuneration) instead of net-profit (low effort, lot of remuneration) when it comes to volunteering. People performing high-cost activities are considered as pure or “real” volunteers. Interestingly, a high consensus exists across countries on what volunteering definitely is, however, there is less consensus on what volunteering might not be. There is even less agreement on what is now generally described as new or modern forms of volunteering.

New forms of volunteering emerged as a consequence of individualization and modernization. As a consequence, individuals started organizing their volunteering autonomously and independently according to their own needs and wants (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). In practice, this meant volunteering outside the collective agenda of church and traditional associational life. For this reason, traditional volunteering is supplemented by “hyphenated (-) volunteering” in which volunteering, obligations and agendas are linked together. Examples include employee-volunteering, community-service, service-learning, family-volunteering, singles-volunteering (dating) and voluntourism. Likewise, (spontaneous) outbursts of volunteering such as the new fundraising events (Serious Request, ALS Ice Bucket Challenge), National Days of Service, “like-tivism” and other forms of online volunteering (micro-volunteering and E-volunteering) provoke and facilitate hyphen volunteering. Oftentimes, these new forms of volunteering are stimulated, facilitated or organized by third parties and fall under the umbrella term of “third-party volunteering” (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010).

These new forms of volunteering have a different profile when we look at the four key dimensions of Cnaan and colleagues (1996). For instance, online volunteering will score (extremely) broadly on ‘degree of organization’ but more stringent on ‘intended beneficiary’ as there would otherwise be no distinction with ordinary social media. Employee or corporate volunteering has two basic profiles. First, an employer-driven program will score broadly on ‘degree of remuneration’ and ‘amount of free choice’ and strictly on ‘intended beneficiary’ and ‘degree of organization’. Employee-driven programs, on the other hand, are more free or less controlled by the company. Employee-driven programs will score stricter on ‘amount of free choice’ and ‘degree of remuneration’, while they can be expected to be more lenient with ‘degree of organization’ and ‘intended beneficiaries’, e.g. by including their own hobby clubs. Likewise, profiles can be created for social internships, family volunteering and other new forms.

At the same time, the large clusters of traditional volunteer activities are easy to identify. Traditional volunteering with a clear beneficiary is characterized by a strict interpretation of all four dimensions (profile 1). Sports associations or other associations score an intermediate position at ‘intended beneficiary’. For much of their volunteer activities they use schedules with explicit expectations and penalties and therefore use more flexible interpretations for ‘remuneration’ and ‘amount of free choice’ for these activities. Another well-known example is the voluntary firefighting service, which is rather pure, except when it comes with remuneration in several European countries (profile 3).

All in all, we argue that four basic profiles can be created:

Profile 1) The regular, traditional volunteer. This volunteer follows the pure pattern in a ‘service to others’ context with a potential debate about the ‘intended beneficiaries’ becoming broader in a ‘member benefit’ and associational context.

Profile 2) The voluntary third-party volunteer has a mixed pattern where ‘free choice’ and ‘remuneration’ are seen in a broader perspective, while ‘structure’ is seen in a more pure form. The ‘intended beneficiary’ is complex as these volunteers mostly do activities for people in need, but also have a very explicit instrumental goal for themselves or their third-party organization (e.g., government, corporations, educational institutes).

Profile 3) The mandatory third-party volunteer has a very broad perspective with the broadest interpretation possible on ‘free choice’, ‘remuneration’ (e.g. preventing losing welfare benefits) and ‘intended beneficiary’.

Profile 4) The spontaneous volunteer is mostly very pure on ‘free choice’ and ‘remuneration’ but extremely broad on ‘structure’ and mixed on ‘intended beneficiary’.

This leads to the following table:

Component of the perception	Traditional volunteer	Voluntary third-party volunteer	Mandatory third-party volunteer	Spontaneous volunteer
Amount of free choice	The ability to voluntarily choose	Relatively uncoerced	Obligation to volunteer	The ability to voluntarily choose
Kind of remuneration	None at all None, Expenses reimbursed	Expenses reimbursed Instrumental benefits	Very clear benefits Stipend / low pay	None at all
Degree of organization / structure	Formal	Formal	Formal	Informal
Intended beneficiaries	Service context: Benefit / help others / strangers  Associational context: Benefit oneself (as well)	Benefit / help others / strangers & Benefit oneself (as well)	Benefit / help others / strangers & Benefit oneself (as well)	Benefit / help others / strangers & Benefit oneself (as well)

Table 2: Profiles of volunteering

## Consequence

The world is changing and so are the reasons for and ways in which people volunteer. This is not surprising as volunteering is a social phenomenon. Its meaning and interpretation change over time and place. Today's volunteering is fundamentally differently shaped than it was a few decades ago, although the direction and speed of that change might differ between countries and regions. Although volunteering changes with time, its conceptualization from 1996 seems to remain valid, as the four key dimensions fit both traditional forms of volunteering as well as the new forms. Yet, the model of the four key dimensions results nowadays in many more profiles than perhaps initially thought.

So, volunteer-involving organizations need to investigate what is their implicit perception of volunteering. Based upon that they should question how many volunteers are excluded because the organization simply does not recognize, acknowledge and recruit these new volunteering profiles. Of course, broadening the perception of volunteering might have consequences for current volunteer management systems and potentially create some tension between the traditional 'hard boiled' volunteers versus the new 'lesser' types.

Governments and statistical bureaus that want to measure volunteering should carefully revise their measure instruments in order to not miss out on these new forms of volunteering. Otherwise, they might find a decline while in reality this might be different. It is important to understand that the new forms of volunteering in many cases have a positive effect on the percentage of the population volunteering but a negative effect on the average amount of hours the volunteer engages for.

Governments or other agencies that want to develop a culture and habit of volunteering in their communities, should invest in projects creating these new forms of volunteering supported by campaigns aimed at broadening the perception of volunteering. By broadening this perception also many barriers to volunteer might be removed.

**References:**

Cnaan, R. A., Handy, F., & Wadsworth, M. (1996). Defining who is a volunteer: Conceptual and empirical considerations. *Nonprofit and voluntary sector quarterly*, 25(3), 364-383.

Handy, F., Cnaan, R.A., Brudney, J., Ascoli, U., Meijs, L.C.P.M., and Ranade, S. (2000), 'Public perception of "Who is a volunteer": An examination of the net-cost approach from a cross-cultural perspective', *Voluntas*, 11(1), 45-65. DOI: 10.1023/A:1008903032393

Haski-Leventhal, D., Meijs, L. C. P. M., & Hustinx, L. (2010). The third party model: enhancing volunteering through governments, corporations and educational institutes. *Journal of Social Policy*, 39(1), 139–158. DOI: 10.1017/S004727940990377

Hustinx, L. & F. Lammertyn. 2003. Collective and reflexive styles of volunteering: A sociological modernization perspective. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. 14:2, 167-187.

Meijs, L. C. P. M., Handy, F. , Cnaan, R.A., Brudney, J.L., Ascoli, U., Ranade, S., Hustinx, L., Weber, S. & Weiss, I. (2003). All in the Eyes of the Beholder? Perceptions of Volunteering Across Eight Countries. In: Paul Dekker en Loek Halman (red.), (2003) *The value of volunteering: Cross- cultural perspectives*. New York: Kluwer/Plenum, (p. 19-34).



Philine van Overbeeke MSc is an academic researcher and part-time PhD candidate at the Business-Society Management department of Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM).

<https://www.rsm.nl/people/philine-van-overbeeke/>



Prof. Dr. Lucas Meijs is a professor of "Strategic Philanthropy and Volunteering" at the Business-Society Management department of Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM).

<https://www.rsm.nl/people/lucas-meijs/>



Dr. Stephanie Koolen- Maas is a postdoctoral researcher at the Business-Society Management department of Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) and at the Centre for Philanthropic Studies at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.

<https://www.eur.nl/people/stephanie-koolen-maas>

Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) is one of Europe's top-ranked business schools. RSM provides ground-breaking research and education furthering excellence in all aspects of management and is based in the international port city of Rotterdam – a vital nexus of business, logistics and trade. RSM's primary focus is on developing business leaders with international careers who can become a force for positive change by carrying their innovative mindset into a sustainable future. Our first-class range of bachelor, master, MBA, PhD and executive programmes encourage them to become critical, creative, caring and collaborative thinkers and doers. Study information and activities for future students, executives and alumni are also organised from the RSM office in Chengdu, China. [www.rsm.nl](http://www.rsm.nl)



The Centre for European Volunteering (CEV), established in 1992, is the European network of over 60 organisations dedicated to the promotion of, and support to, volunteers and volunteering in Europe at European, national or regional level. CEV channels the collective priorities and concerns of its member organisations to the institutions of the European Union and the Council of Europe. CEV's vision is a Europe in which volunteers are central in building a cohesive, sustainable and inclusive society based on solidarity and active citizenship. CEV is a European network of organizations dedicated to the promotion of and support to volunteers and volunteering. Our mission is to provide collaborative leadership to create an enabling environment for volunteering in Europe.

