

Some Provocative Questions to Prompt International Dialogue

by Susan Ellis
President, Energize, Inc.

As leaders of volunteers, we must be articulate about what we do and why we do it. Those of us who have been in the field of volunteerism for longer than twenty years have witnessed enormous changes—most for the good, but not all. One important fact is that we can now say with some assurance that there IS a field! Training opportunities, international conferences, hundreds of books, journals for volunteer managers in every English-speaking country and some others, cyberspace resources—all are now here for newcomers and long-timers alike. But we still face serious challenges. We still tilt at some big windmills.

It seems to be a global fact that, while volunteers are recognized for their many contributions, they remain undervalued in the context of institutions and professions. Volunteers are "free help" assumed by politicians and organizations but rarely the focus of attention.

This simplistic attitude about volunteering results in many misconceptions. One is that somehow volunteers are a substitute for adequate funding. It is up to us to affirm that tackling social problems requires both volunteers and money. Another misconception is that advocates of the "voluntary sector" or of "NGOs" automatically speak for volunteer issues. Not true. Many NGOs resist the involvement of volunteers in the delivery of services, while volunteers are also highly active in government-administered programs.

The goal we all share is to place volunteers and volunteerism on the agenda—so that volunteers and those who coordinate them can be supported and valued in ways that

count. As more and more countries face economic crises, attention turns to volunteers as a "second choice" way of providing services. It is up to us to emphasize the first choice reasons why volunteering is so important:

For organizations, volunteers bring:

- credibility
- advocacy
- a sense of community ownership
- the "luxury of focus"
- equality of participation
- service that matters to the recipient

Keep in mind that it is only one model for volunteers to "assist" in an organization. Volunteers can be partners, team members, and innovators. And a vast arena is the all-volunteer association in which there are no or only a small core of paid staff.

For individual volunteers, volunteering provides:

- the chance to stand up for one's beliefs
- freedom of choice
- the opportunity to contribute
- a chance to be well-rounded, balancing job, family, and community
- a form of "self-help" rather than "charity"

For society, volunteers are vital because they:

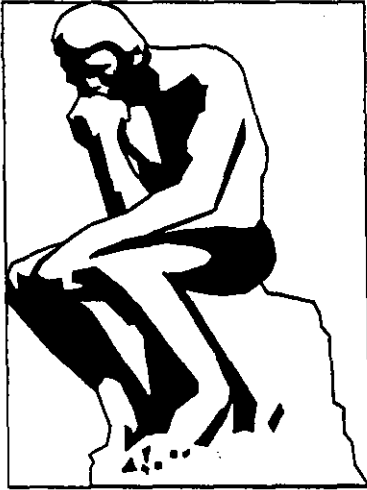
- ◆ recognize needs before any institution or business does
- ◆ can take up unpopular causes and make them popular
- ◆ can cross political and national boundaries as private citizens

Massive change seems to be happening around the globe in almost every aspect of social and economic life. Without presumptively offering predictions or solutions, here are some of the



questions that are in my mind as I come to the IAVE World Volunteer Conference. I offer them here in the hope that we can grapple with these issues collectively:

- ▶ How do we agree among ourselves and then teach others a common vocabulary for what volunteering is and does?
- ▶ What do we see as the continuum of community service approaches—ranging from the unremunerated volunteer to the stipended worker, from the person volunteering by choice to the person mandated into service, etc.? Is there such a thing as a "pure" volunteer—and does it matter?
- ▶ How can we identify and use the commonalities between the two major components of the volunteer world: the agency-related volunteer program and the all-volunteer association?
- ▶ How can volunteers go beyond political and national boundaries to find mutual solutions for mutual problems facing us all, such as AIDS, pollution, or caring for the aging population?
- ▶ How do we find a legitimate balance between "professionalizing" the "management" of volunteers while still maintaining the unique "amateur" (for the love of something) quality of volunteering?



- ▶ How do we deal with internal prejudices that pit those who volunteer full time against those who are paid to coordinate volunteer programs?
 - ▶ How will volunteering stand up to the animosity of trade unions? We actually can have the shared goal of 100% employment and 100% volunteering, but conflicts inevitably arise, especially when funds are tight.
 - ▶ Where are the lines between encouraging self-esteem and community ownership through volunteering and unwilling participation of people who need public assistance?
 - ▶ What is the position of full-time, stipended volunteer service vs. less intensive and unremunerated volunteering? Why do we call it a "living allowance" when we give it to a volunteer or intern, but almost the same amount of money given to poverty-line workers is considered a "living wage"?
 - ▶ What role will volunteering play in dealing with aging? As seniors begin to be seen as three sub-groups (the young elderly, the middle elderly, and the oldest elderly), how will volunteering react? How can we take the leadership in deploying
 - the talents of senior volunteers as well as in providing services to older people through volunteers?
 - ▶ What are the best ways to channel the volunteer energies of teenagers and youth into "world citizenship"?
 - ▶ Can volunteering again be a vehicle for elevating women, rather than be rejected by women as undervalued labor? Historically, in the United States, volunteering gave women a voice they could get no other way. Might this still be a field in which women can rise to the top? But at the same time, how do we equalize the gender roles?
 - ▶ What role can volunteering play in addressing the needs and gifts of families, especially as what we define as "family" undergoes radical change?
 - ▶ How can we strengthen national and local Volunteer Centers/Bureaus to do the job we need them to do?
 - ▶ How will the awesome power of the Internet enable international exchange in our field? What are the ways we can design opportunities for "virtual volunteering"?
 - ▶ Is "corporate volunteering" real or is it a case of "The Emperor has no clothes"? How can we harness the volunteer talents of multi-national corporation employees?
 - ▶ What role can citizen volunteers play in breaking down international mistrust and intercultural prejudices of centuries of tradition?
 - ▶ As immigration and racial diversity increase throughout the world, can volunteers help break down discrimination barriers, too?
 - ▶ How can societies that relied primarily on the state for services re-discover the value of participatory democracy and the role of citizen involvement in service delivery? This includes volunteers in government services, too.
 - ▶ As the world grows smaller, how will the approaches of European and American volunteering be received by Africa and Asia—and what will we learn in return about how those continents deal with social problems?
- In our daily work, leaders of volunteers are often isolated. Alone we can do little, together we can do so much more. We need one another and networks such as IAVE, Volonteurope, or the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA). When we come together in conferences such as this one, we must share HOW we do things as well as "what" it is we do.
- Finally, we also have to be concerned with political action as well as with direct service. Volunteers rarely have the chance to speak for themselves. As leaders of volunteers we must be clear on what volunteers need in order to be most effective and then advocate for that in an articulate way—to place volunteering on the agenda!

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, Inc., an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. Based in Philadelphia (USA), the 21-year old firm has helped a wide diversity of clients across North America and Europe to start or expand volunteer efforts. Call for a copy of the free "Volunteer Energy Resource Catalog": In North America, call toll-free: 1-800-395-9800. Outside N.A.: 011-215-438-8342 or fax 011-215-438-0434. Or, browse the catalog and much more volunteer management information on the Energize Website: <http://www.energizeinc.com>