

As I See It

International Trends in Volunteering

By Foster Murphy



Foster Murphy is the director of The Volunteer Centre of the United Kingdom. He made the following speech to VOLUNTEER's board of directors last November and will convene a session at the upcoming LIVE conference, sponsored by the International Association for Volunteer Effort, in Washington, D.C. (See "News from VOLUNTEER" in the Voluntary Action News section of this issue for details.)

It is possible to take a global look at the status of volunteering, its environment and important trends as a result of opportunities provided by IAVE (International Association for Volunteer Effort), its regional structures and the bilateral contacts between the national centres in the UK and the USA. I pick out ten:

1. The growth in the number of national volunteer centers that are developing a network together. In 1982 no more than half a dozen were represented at the LIVE Conference in Oxford; in Bogota in 1984 a dozen were present; and in Sydney two years later it was up to 20. Such national resource agencies are important insofar as they are advocates for volunteering; provide sources of information, publications and training; and seek both to promote good practice and protect the rights of volunteers.

2. In many countries there is a keen political interest in the potential of volunteering. I have, in recent months, heard the president of Italy, the prime minister of Portugal, the president of the USA, the wife of the prime minister of Australia, and senior government ministers in the UK speak out in favor of the role of volunteers in their respective countries. The content of these speeches has laid heavy emphasis on the economic worth of volunteers and has a common pragmatic approach. The underlying values of volunteering are often ignored, in my judgment.

3. Unemployment and underemployment is a global phenomenon affecting rich and poor countries with varying degrees of severity. Volunteering is not the solution for unemployment. But all work is not employment (i.e., equated with earning an income)—domestic work and voluntary work are vital components of the concept. And volunteering offers many of the features of employment, other than income—status, satisfaction, self-esteem, and association. Gradually, these ideas are emerging in the volunteer community.

4. There is, however, a danger that in societies where unemployment or underemployment is a serious issue that governments equate voluntary work with a solution. Measures are introduced with a lack of understanding that free choice is eliminated when people are forced to undertake community service in return for a low/subsistence income. This cannot, by definition, be called volunteering as the element of free choice is eliminated. The tasks people undertake through enforced community service as well as volunteering may look similar (just as volunteers working in some settings may perform a range of tasks alongside and similar to professionals). But the volunteer community must jealously guard, in each country, the freedom of choice which is at the heart of volunteering.

5. In many countries the issue of the ways in which volunteers' activity relates to that of professionals together with the consequent need for mutual understanding with labor/trade union interests remains important. It will always be important for partnerships, clarity about roles, removal of antagonisms that run deep to be part of the development of good practice in each country's context.

6. Consequent on this the volunteer world must be very clear about the rights of volunteers. Best practice in training, the management of volunteers, support systems, insurance and guarding the legal rights and privileges of volunteers need safeguarding and development. European countries following a UK lead have adopted a Charter for Volunteers.

7. As part of the recognition and celebration of the role of volunteers, a number of countries now organize a National Volunteer Week. The USA has undertaken this already for more than a decade, but Belgium and the UK have also begun such a promotional idea. Put alongside the UN declaration of December 5 as International Volunteer Day the idea of national and international celebration of volunteering is now a reality.

8. The world of business and the private corporate sector is also being recognized as a new source of partnership with volunteer interests. Led by the USA where national investment in this partnership is led by the White House and local partnerships are serviced by the national and local Volunteer Centers, the potential of such partnerships is being recognized in European countries including the UK, France and Italy as well as in Australia.

9. In many places it is now recognized that self-help and mutual aid are a mainstream part of volunteering. Groups clustered around a common problem which enable people to support one another and encourage the helped to be helpers are seen in most countries. Health and social welfare issues often predominate, but economic mutual aid and community enterprise can often find a blend in hybrid organizations which seek to offer volunteer involvement as part of community development.

10. Finally, it is significant that the roots of volunteering are seen as the significant element in the culture of many countries, rich and poor alike. A recognition that the maintenance and continuation of democracy, based on the free choice of citizens, will be strengthened by the recognition of the role of volunteering is important. It needs to be made explicit and not merely regarded as a given immutable fact. In fact, democracy needs cherishing, and volunteer community involvement is a vital nourishment to a nation's deeply rooted culture.