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APPROPRIATE ROLE OF CITIZEN-VOLUNTEERS IN THE FEDERAL SYSTEM

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The following discussion deals with voluntary activities of citizens vis-a-vis their government above and beyond voting, party politics, and other more structured participatory opportunities in a representative democracy. It might nevertheless be appropriate at the outside to mention the obvious: the voluntary activities of citizens will be drastically eroded if the subtle hand of oligarchical manipulation dictates the decisions. The formal political process has to function if voluntarism is to be consequential, otherwise those in power can be tempted to engage in friendly fascism (Bertram Gross' term) in which citizen volunteers are regarded as children keeping busy in a sandbox (George Sternlieb's imagery).

A second caveat may be in order. "The Federal system" is not a monolithic and permanently rigid structure. It is, rather, a system of many parts that are in flux. Like the term "community" or "volunteer" "the federal system" is a unitary term denoting, in reality, a pluralistic, dynamic, and difficult-to-pin-down phenomenon of many sub-parts.

The topic of this paper, then, is not as simple as speculating about the relationship between the federal government and the volunteer. Which volunteer, doing what kind of volunteering, vis-a-vis what governmental entity, and for what purpose? are some of the pertinent questions. The "appropriateness" of the volunteer's role must be seen in the context of these variables and, therefore, I will stay away from making prescriptive generalizations. Instead, let me raise a few questions about this elusive and dynamic issue.

Two principal areas where volunteers are used in the federal system are service delivery and decision making.

A. Volunteers in Service Delivery

1. Off-loading of vital services. In a period of budgetary constraints, what essential governmental services can best be "off-loaded" to citizen volunteers? By off-loading is meant the turning over to citizen volunteer groups and individuals whole chunks of service delivery functions.

In many Third World countries citizen volunteers build schools, pay teachers, build roads and water systems, and disinfect cattle. The US equivalent perhaps is the extensive system of volunteer fire departments manned by 2 million volunteers, ambulance corps, blood banks, auxiliary police, etc. These are unpaid services performed under the direction of governmental personnel, but that enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. These are the categories of services that are vital to the health and safety of the community. If they were not performed, presumably government would have to step in and pay for the whole freight. These functions cannot be left unattended.

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What additional functions can or should be off-loaded to volunteers? Public health services? Waste recycling? Volunteer teachers in public education? Child care? Small scale experiences are available in all of these. The questions that might concern us about the volunteer's appropriate role in this category include (a) what system of accountability will best serve the volunteer and the government? How much autonomy of function is desirable workable? Can a voluntary organization be sufficiently accountable to the electorate? (b) What payments of public funds should/can be made to the volunteer and his organization for rendering the off-loaded service? If there are no financial regards, should such services be rewarded with at least governmentally provided insurance, tax deductability, etc.? (c) How will present civil servants react to volunteers entering their traditional turf? What will trade unions, professional associations, and the feminist movement have to say about this?

2. Co-production of services. Under the banner of "partnership" or "private-public collaboration", the "New Federalism" is attempting to weld together the efforts of government and the private-for-profit and private-voluntary sectors. Co-production implies more than joint planning; it involves active collaboration and joint investments (of money, facilities, and labor) in the implementation of a project. A symbiosis is involved here in which the resulting "greater third" can only come about with the commitment of all parties involved. Housing is a good example.

Nothing would please the President (regardless of party) and HUD more than to see whole neighborhoods renewed through a comprehensive strategy that includes public housing for the poor, privately developed and publicly subsidized housing for moderate income families, privately developed and federally guaranteed housing for the upper middle and luxury classes (unassisted, that is, except for the considerable tax credits permitted), government directly building public facilities, etc. And into this mix of housing is added a goodly pinch of governmentally encouraged volunteer activity by individuals and not-for-profit groups. Individuals can engage in sweat-equity programs, churches can help to sponsor Section 8 housing, tenant organizations can obtain community management contracts, and, of course, the planning and oversight of such housing will have volunteers participating as members of planning boards, decentralized neighborhood development groups, and as consumer representatives.

The idea behind all this co-production is that everybody will be involved and everybody will profit: the private housing developer will be doing well by doing good, the building trades will get much needed employment, CETA workers can be cranked into the scheme, the banks and insurance companies will engage in corporate social responsibility, and the resident will get a new or rehabilitated dwelling unit (although inevitably it will cost him more to live in than before), and he will have had meaningful involvement, and presumably satisfaction, because of personal involvement in the reshaping of his environment.

The idea of co-production raises a host of questions that should concern the advocates of volunteerism in the federal system: (a) Who usually profits most in such relationships? Do all parties profit? How can principles of equity be assured, especially for the low and moderate income resident who

is asked to volunteer his services? (b) Who calls the shots in the often incredibly complicated mechanisms for co-production? Since public, private, and voluntary sectors are involved, who coordinates whom? Could government achieve production of goods and services with a more favorable cost-benefit ratio if it did the job alone, not bothering about partners, especially not volunteer partners?

3. Assigning governmentally supported volunteers. Still another role of volunteers in the federal system is the direct provision of volunteers or quasi-volunteers (stipended volunteers) such as VISTA and Peace Corps volunteers who are assigned by the government (which recruits, trains, and modestly finances them) to private non-profit or public endeavors, at home and abroad. These volunteers are usually operating under governmental rules, but their roles as governmental operatives is not very visible. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to tell VISTA volunteer from a CETA worker or field work student or private volunteer as they work shoulder to shoulder in urban poverty areas.

This category of volunteerism raises the question whether federal funds are better allocated directly to national and international non-military service corps or to private, non-profit agencies with volunteer programs. Put another way, should government recruit, train, and assign "its" volunteers to a private non-profit project, thus indirectly supporting it, or would it be more beneficial to give such private programs outright subsidy and let them recruit, train, assign, and control the volunteer? Is it not government encroachment on volunteerism and the voluntary sector to serve as the "middle man" or "volunteer-broker" when the volunteers ultimately come from and end up working for the private voluntary sector? When is government direct recruitment, training, support, assignment, and control of volunteers or quasi-volunteers appropriate? Should this occur only when the volunteers are used directly in on-going government programs with a separate mandate (for instance, volunteer tax consultants for the I.R.S.)? And what is the relative cost-effectiveness of government recruited, trained, allocated or controlled volunteers or quasi-volunteers as contrasted with privately recruited, trained, and assigned volunteers in non-profit agencies providing the same kinds of services with a government subsidy or grant?

B. Volunteers in Governmental Decision Making

An amazing thing happened to administrative processes in the federal system in America during the past 15 years: citizen volunteers are increasingly represented at a number of decision points. "Today virtually all programs in which federally appropriated funds are used," says a recent government publication, "require access to the decision making process." We are familiar with the administrative regulations that mandate and encourage citizen participation with its public hearings, advisory councils, planning boards, consumer councils, resident representatives, etc. These bodies have actual or potential power and their political muscle cannot be ignored by the various levels of government, especially by local government.

Ms. Murphy is no longer volunteering her services only to the church women's organization, but now is also making decisions about the flow of federal CDBG funds to the improvement of her neighborhood.

Here are just a few of the issues that have to be addressed in discussing decision making roles of volunteers in projects that involve the federal system.

1. Institutionalization of volunteerism and citizen participation. The mechanisms for involving citizens in decision making (and in service delivery, of course) revolve, for the most part, around organizations. Voluntarism in America has created an impressive national superstructure of which this conference is an example. On the local level, too, citizens don't participate only as autonomous individuals, but through their own interest groupings (block organizations, consumer associations) or joint government-citizen panels (neighborhood planning boards, for example). This institutionalization (and the concurrent professionalization) often creates oligarchical tendencies involving an unintended distancing of the grassroots from the people who now operate the participatory machinery.

How can a truly broad participatory base be assured as volunteers engage in communal decision making? Who represents the community? What "due process" should be followed in selecting grassroots and consumer spokespeople to the various boards? Who is accountable to whom? How can professionalization in volunteerism be appropriately restrained from squeezing out the amateur citizen volunteer?

2. Preserving the volunteer advocacy role. In any joint government-citizen decision making, the volunteer citizen must be free to take a strong advocacy role. He or she must not be unduly restrained from kicking government's shins. Indeed, many community based citizens organizations are born out of a sense of protest. But as the organization becomes older and especially after it acquires a staff (and engages in the previously discussed institutionalization), this advocacy role is often compromised. The organization of volunteers becomes financially vulnerable. A subtle change often takes place when the organization, scurrying around for funds, finds refuge in an LEAA or CDBG grant and now delivers services at the behest and through the funding of the same government against which it protests. Few organizations, I think, can walk that tight rope with integrity.

Is there need, then, for preserving arm's length relationships between explicitly advocacy oriented volunteer groups and government? If some distancing between the two is deemed functional, how can advocacy groups best go about seeking funds, especially when its constituency is poor? Could a National Endowment for Volunteerism, modeled after the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, fill this important gap, among its other possible functions?

3. Appropriate information for the volunteer. Decision makers up and down the ladder of the Federal system need to have access to appropriate information. How can such information similarly be brought to citizen volunteers involved in decision making?

My own experiences suggest that volunteers are often subjected, on the one hand, to irrelevant information and overkill of technical data or, on the other hand, to inadequate and only sporadic information. What is "appropriate information?" Who should control the flow of information to the volunteer? Who should do the "filtering in" and "filtering out" of information? And what about the reverse flow of information from the grassroots volunteers up through the various level of the federal system?