Some developments on volunteering in the Netherlands

Hoe te verwijzen naar deze publicatie?:


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Introduction

In many Western countries a (re-)invention of civil society and voluntarism can be observed. Sometimes it is framed in ideological terms (UK, big society) or financial terms (Netherlands). Now and again it can be questioned if politicians leading the way understand what they are talking about as they describe the movement almost exclusively in service delivery terms. This, unlike / in comparison to the revival or start of the civil society in other countries such as Egypt or Tunisia where it is much more a political movement.

An important part of this movement requires volunteer energy, voluntarism, philanthropy and volunteering. For today the focus is on volunteering. First, some background clarification, an important notion. Voluntary energy is the raw potential of a society to act in the civil society. Volunteer energy can be described as the raw potential of a society to act as volunteers in the civil society. Volunteering is the actual use of the volunteer energy. The (future) use of this energy (and it source) can be influenced positively and/ or negatively by how it is dealt with now (see Brudney and Meijis, 2009).

1 Quantitative

The amount of volunteering, measured in hours and in % of population, is remarkably stable in the Netherlands since the early nineties and probably higher than ever before (also due to a growing population). About 35% to 45% of the Dutch population above the age of 18 does volunteer work. This translates to an average of 200 hours per year leading to a high powered substantive volunteer work force of 500.000 plus FTE. In comparison this is about the same size as the civil servant workforce, but in healthcare there are more than 800.000 FTE. Volunteering makes up for about 5% to 7% of the paid workforce. Most volunteers can be found in sports and recreation. Healthcare, although mostly the focus point of the discussion, is fifth or seventh in ranking, depending on how fields are defined. In general volunteering is done more often by men than by women, by older people as well as highly educated people, by more whites than immigrants and more in smaller towns and villages than in cities (SCP, 2009)). The shortage in supply of volunteering can better be explained by an endless demand than by people who are not willing to do something. Actual shortages can be found in health care (but that is also a paid staff issue) and in board assignments (because they are still organized in old fashioned ways).

In short, the amount of volunteers, as % of the population has stayed remarkably the same while the amount of volunteer energy (hours) has possibly even grown.
2 Qualitative

The ‘quality’ of volunteering, the way it is organized, has changed considerably. Volunteering has become less of a ‘total commitment to one organization’ and more of a ‘get-in, get-a-T-shirt, get out’, ‘zap’ style volunteering. Volunteering in this post-modern time is focussed more on the volunteer who wants to achieve something that benefits him- or her. There must be something as a bibliographical match; it must fit the lifestyle of that moment (see Hustinx and Lammertijn, 2003). In general the whole segmentation, fragmentation, becoming flexible etc. also happened in volunteering and luckily volunteer involving organizations have been able to formulate an answer.

In general the answer is to make it possible for volunteers to volunteer based upon the conditions of the volunteers themselves instead of the conditions of the volunteer involving organization. The essential difference between employability (paid work) and volunteerability (unpaid work) is indeed that in the first the individual must adapt (especially when getting some social benefit) while in the latter it is much more the organization that must change. In that perspective it must be clear that volunteering is not a job description but a pay rate, or the other way around, money is a compensation for the inconveniences of entering someone else his/her organization (strange working hours etc.).

Volunteerability has three building blocks: the availability, the assets and the willingness. The potential volunteerability can be defined on the level of individuals and society. However, actual volunteerability is ‘cashed’ in when volunteer involving organizations can negotiate with potential volunteers volunteer scenario’s (combinations of availability, assets and assignments, triple AAA) that work for the volunteer, the organization and the good cause (see Meijs et al, 2006)

In short, the way that volunteer energy must and can be transformed into volunteering has changed dramatically over time. Luckily many volunteer involving organizations have been very successful in achieving to adapt to the new situation.
3 Society

The new, more challenging issue is situated at the level of the general society. By the diminishing of traditional local and religious structures it is becoming more difficult to actually find volunteer energy and make appeals to people to become a volunteer. Traditionally the church used to be the place to recruit volunteers because it offers the two main ingredients for a good recruitment campaign: normative appeals (we want you to volunteer) and functional organizing (this is how you can volunteer). The normative appeal can and in many cases will be made by the religious environment. The functional organizing is made possible by the community organizations that participate in the meet and greet afterwards. The fact that recruiter and potential volunteers also share more of their lives and have a continuous relation in the village and church, helps!

The challenge for many western countries is to reorganize the processes of normative appeals (if not pressure) and functional organizing. If possible also in an environment of ongoing interaction that is based upon trust and networks (social capital). Recruitment strategies that are only based upon the use of social media and internet sites to send out the message to people that they are supposed to volunteer, or that they can volunteer for organization X are in many cases ineffective because they do not really combine these three elements. The struggle with this need to re-embed volunteering leads to a proliferation of new strategies, programs and concepts (seen Hustinx and Meijs, 2011).

One more or less successful strategy is ‘add-on’ in which volunteering is combined with another activity such as in single-volunteers (dating), voluntourism (holidays), green gymnastics (active living/aging), service learning (learning in a formal environment), corporate volunteering (work obligations), family-volunteering (quality time) etc. This strategy is mostly aimed at influencing the availability of the volunteerability perspective. In reality it has much more to do with getting into someone’s schedule and agenda than with the actual shortage of time. The ‘add-on’ strategy can be combined with another strategy of ‘third party involvement’ in which the church as focal point is replaced by another party who has some interest in this volunteering by its members. This third party can provide the needed normative pressure and in many cases also organize the actual program. Examples can be found in corporations (corporate volunteering), educational institutes (service learning, community service) and social security organizations (volunteering into employability schemes).

To conclude, the places where to find volunteer energy and the systems how to tap into these sources are changing. As a society there is a growing need to accommodate this re-embedding of volunteering!
More readings


