



Volunteering and Wellbeing

Scotland Performs: The case for a new volunteering indicator

Helen Harper, November 2015

Volunteering participation is a critical indicator for community wellbeing in Scotland. Volunteering in Scottish communities indicates that communities are connected and cohesive, that members trust each other and are empowered to participate. Volunteering in Scottish communities indicates that wellbeing is actively being generated for all members of the community, whether or not they volunteer.

As well as being appropriate, a volunteering indicator is highly practical. It can act as a catalyst for volunteer growth, providing an achievable pathway for decision-makers and practitioners to improve the wellbeing of our nation.

Volunteering participation is measured through the Scottish Household Survey. Using this data enables Scottish Government to utilise an existing investment in robust, time series data to monitor wellbeing across Scotland.

Background

The drive to improve Scotland Performs as a tool to measure Scotland's national well-being is very welcome. This drive is not unique to Scotland. Academic and policy literature from the UK and beyond recognises the need to move beyond market-based GDP to measure the health of nations, adopting a more holistic perspective which recognises the importance of societal wellbeing (e.g. Stiglitz et al., 2009).

Volunteering participation has been identified as a critical dimension of this approach (Boarini, R et al., 2006; Office for National Statistics, 2009; O'Donnell, G et al., 2014). Existing wellbeing frameworks reflect this concern using volunteering as a proxy to assess individuals' and communities' wellbeing (see for example, OECD Better life Initiative, ONS Well-being Index; Human Well-being Index, Index of Wellbeing of Canada). Scotland Performs however, does not. We believe this position needs to change.

What is volunteering?

Within the United Kingdom there are numerous definitions of volunteering. A review of definitions concludes that there are: "*three core characteristics or defining*



principles of volunteering. It is an activity which is: unpaid, undertaken through an act of free will, of benefit to others” (Ellis Paine et al., 2014).

In 2011 an in-depth study into how people participated in society (Brodie et al., 2011) mapped a wide variety of participatory activities. Volunteering activities that were identified included:

- Involvement in formal voluntary organisations (e.g. volunteering in charity shops, being on boards or committees of charities, acting as a volunteer befriender or translator, volunteering for sport clubs or young people’s groups, or for local council services, private nurseries or museums).
- Involvement in informal or grassroots community groups (e.g. membership of tenants and residents associations, neighbourhood watch, village hall committees, running community newsletters and websites, helping run bee keeping and dog walking groups).
- Formal and informal mutual aid and self-help (e.g. being a member of a peer support group, sharing childcare responsibilities, making cakes for a community event, taking part in a community clean up).

Voluntary activities may also involve participation in civil society in the form of political and non-governmental action and participation in political life such as: attending area forums, taking part in demonstrations and protests, signing petitions, campaigning and lobbying, contacting MPs or the local council to lobby on behalf of community issues.

Ellis Paine et al. (2014) argue one way in which this minefield of activities can be organised is thinking about the degree of organisation involved:

- organised volunteering (volunteering carried out in or through a formally constituted entity with a long term or permanent existence);
- collective volunteering (in groups that are not formally organised, lack a constitution or legal entity, lack clarity about who is and is not a member and may fade away when the original purpose has been achieved); and
- individual volunteering (with no host organisation or collective endeavour such as doing someone’s shopping, transporting or escorting someone, providing childcare for someone outside your home).

Woolvin (2011) adopted a similar framework to help map different types of participation throughout the lifecourse of residents in deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland. He developed a ‘spectrum of participation’ to illustrate how different types of organised, collective and individual activities can be thought of as more or less ‘formal’.

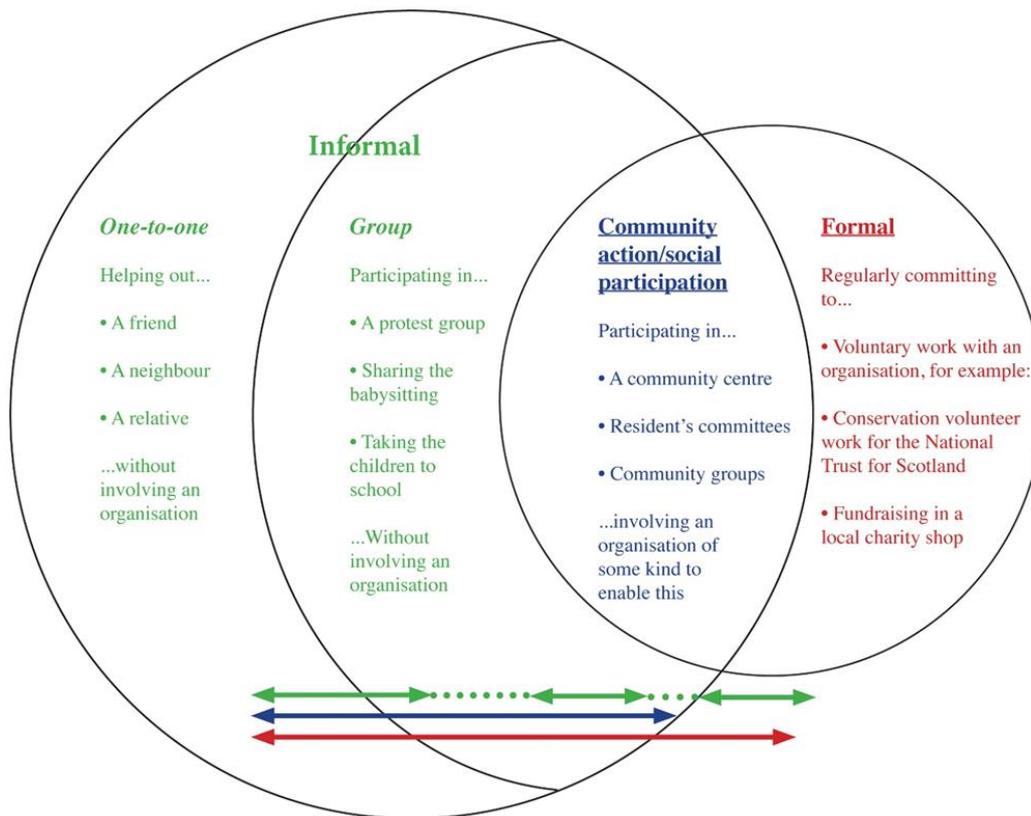


Fig 1. Spectrum of participation, from Woolvin, M. and Harper, H. 2014

While we can describe the range of volunteering participation that is likely to take place, our understanding of who takes part, motivations, barriers and impacts – including its connection to wellbeing - is largely restricted to ‘formal volunteering’. Research and evaluation on voluntary participation focuses on relatively organised activities, done through an organisation, club or group. It is this element of the spectrum (Fig 1. red sphere) which this paper will focus on. It is this type of participation the Scottish Executive highlighted in the 2004 Volunteering Strategy:

“giving time and energy through a third party, which can bring measurable benefits to the volunteer, individual beneficiaries, groups and organisations, communities, environment and society at large. It is a choice undertaken of one’s own free will, and is not motivated primarily for financial gain or for a wage or salary”. (Scottish Executive, 2004, p28).

Formal volunteering is measured through the Scottish Household Survey (SHS). The types of volunteering activities (through an organisation, club or group) which are captured in this survey are:



Generally helping out
Raising money
Helping to organise or run events or activities
Doing whatever is required
Committee work
Providing advice or assistance to others
Education or training or coaching
Office work or administration
Visiting, buddying or befriending people
Providing transport or driving
Managing, organising or co-ordinating other unpaid helpers
Providing direct services (e.g. meals on wheels, doing odd jobs)
Campaigning
Counselling
Representing others
IT Support
Advocacy

For clarification, people may volunteer *in an informal way* through an organisation, club or group (captured by the categories: 'doing whatever is required' and 'generally helping out', above) but the context is still formal (i.e. organised through an organisation, club or group) so this is still classed as 'formal volunteering'.

As a National Statistics output, the Scottish Household Survey methodology (including question development) complies with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics and the relatively low proportion of 'non' and 'don't know' responses in relation to activities undertaken (Scottish Government, 2015) leads us to believe this suite of activities captures the majority of volunteering which takes place in Scotland.

Where relevant this paper will also discuss the relevance of informal participation to individual and community wellbeing. These informal type of activities take place outside the home for neighbours or friends (but not relatives), are self-managed and do not require the facilitation of groups or organisations. Activities might include: taking an elderly neighbour to the doctor, informal childcare arrangements, tutoring a neighbour's child, or looking after a pet or property while someone is in hospital or on holiday. This type of participation is more commonly understood as 'neighbourliness' or 'helping out' (situated on the far left of Fig 1). Informal volunteering or 'helping out' is not currently measured in Scotland.



Connecting individual wellbeing and volunteering

Definitions of wellbeing for individuals emphasise a social dimension; individual wellbeing is predicated on the ability to connect and participate. Skilton, L. (2009) cites the 2006 DEFRA Whitehall Wellbeing Working Group definition (membership of the group included government departments, devolved administrations, the Environment Agency, Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government and the Sustainable Development Commission) “*who agreed... a statement of common understanding of wellbeing for policy makers*”:

Wellbeing is a positive physical, social and mental state; it is not just the absence of pain, discomfort and incapacity. It arises not only from the action of individuals, but from a host of collective goods and relationships with other people. It requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, and that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society. It is enhanced by conditions that include supportive personal relationships, involvement in empowered communities, good health, financial security, rewarding employment and a healthy and attractive environment.

Based on this statement Skilton disaggregates wellbeing into the following components: “*involvement in empowered communities, supportive personal relationships, good health, financial security, rewarding employment and a healthy and attractive environment*”. Likewise, Leigh et al. (2011) recognise the idea of “*social well-being as a sense of belonging to our communities, a positive attitude towards others, a feeling that we are contributing to society and engaging in pro-social behaviour, and a belief that society is capable of developing positively*”. They argue “*relationship is at the heart of well-being*” (ibid).

Volunteering is inherently social. It operates through social networks: people are most likely to enter volunteering because they are asked to do so. Scottish charities are most likely to use ‘word of mouth’ to find volunteers (Harper, H. et al., 2011). Positive relationships formed through volunteering sustain participation (Brodie, et al., 2011).

Studies focussing on volunteering motivations and satisfaction highlight the importance of the social experience in sparking and maintaining participation (Low, et al., 2007, Volunteer Development Agency, 2007 and Hurley, et al., 2008 all cited in Rochester, C. et al., 2010). Unsurprisingly therefore, it is the relationship aspect of volunteering – the connectedness experienced through individual relationships and feelings of connecting to society – which brings about enhanced wellbeing for individual volunteers and beneficiaries.



There is a large and growing body of research which identifies the positive impact of volunteering on wellbeing (for volunteers and beneficiaries) as it provides an opportunity for social connectedness. A range of studies (including experimental and cohort, individual studies and reviews) identify those benefits (Jenkinson, C. et al., 2013; von Bonsdorff, M and Rantanen, T. 2011; Seymour and Gale 2004; Okun et al., 1984; Mundle et al., 2012; Cassidy, et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2003, Morrow-Howell et al., 2003; Thoits and Hewitt, 2001; Greenfields and Marks 2004; Konrath et al., 2012, Van Willigen, 2000; Cacioppo 2015, Marmot, 2010 and Kimberlee, 2014). Volunteering is shown to improve volunteers' subjective evaluations of happiness, result in higher life satisfaction (Meier and Stutzer, 2004, Fujiwara, D. 2013), decrease feelings of loneliness (Cacioppo 2015, Marmot, 2010) by enabling a reconnection with society (Kimberlee, 2014) and provide protection against depressive symptoms in later life (Glass et al., 2006 cited in O'Donnell, G, 2014).

While some studies are unable to conclude whether happier people volunteer, or whether volunteering leads to happiness, Meier and Stutzer (2004) capitalised on the opportunity to examine the causal effect through natural experiment, drawing on data from volunteers from (formerly) East Germany whose volunteering opportunities were withdrawn due to infrastructure changes at the point of reunification with West Germany. This study and others (Musick and Wilson, 2003; Caldwell and Wiegand, 2001) show that volunteering causes increased happiness and life satisfaction, and improved mental health. Meier and Stutzer analysis indicates volunteering and happiness are mutually reinforcing: "*volunteering increases happiness, which in turn increases the likelihood of volunteering*" (Meier and Stutzer, 2004).

This evidence demonstrates the generative effect of volunteering for individual wellbeing; this impact is brought about through the social connectedness experienced through volunteering.

Connecting community wellbeing and volunteering

Scottish Government policy, following localism rhetoric and the Christie Commission emphasis on co-production of social services aims to "*strengthen their [communities] role in decision-making and service co-production*" (Steiner and Markantoni, 2013). The successful implementation of these policies rely to a large extent on community members' willingness and ability to volunteer: to give their time to contribute to co-production of services, participate in decision-making and campaign for and manage the transfer of community assets. Indeed, the Scottish Government recognises the critical role of volunteering, engagement and participation in this process. If the Community Empowerment Bill was operating effectively:

"we would expect to see a range of benefits: local democratic participation boosted; increased confidence and skills among



local people; higher numbers of people volunteering in their communities; and more satisfaction with quality of life in a local neighbourhood. Better community engagement and participation leads to the delivery of better, more responsive services and better outcomes for communities” (Scottish Government, <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/engage> accessed September 2015).

Community resilience – “the collective capacity to engage and mobilize community resources to respond to, and influence change” (Leigh et al., 2011) – is closely linked with the concept of empowerment, whereby “*communities are (pro-)active and capable to help themselves, suggesting they are empowered and able to influence local life*” (Hegney et al., 2008, cited in Steiner and Markantoni, 2015). More commonly associated with environmental disasters, this resilience could relate to any external challenge including economic.

‘Community participation and engagement’ then, helps ensure communities are able to take control of decision-making whether in terms of co-delivery of services, taking over community assets, or mobilizing in the face of external threats. In order to participate and engage in decision-making and community life more generally, it is generally accepted that community members must have social capital (Steiner and Markantoni, 2013). Social capital (conceptualised by feelings of trust, reciprocity and belonging) is both sustained and generated through volunteering.

Lim and Laurence (2015) demonstrate that a post recession “*decline in volunteering is...larger among people who distrust their neighbours. In fact, formal volunteering did not decline at all among respondents who say many of their neighbours can be trusted*” (ibid). This relationship is stronger for formal volunteering than informal helping out. In addition to trust, they argue that “*people are more likely to help others when there is a strong culture of trust and reciprocity and also when they receive personal requests*” (p338). They argue that “*volunteering activities are fundamentally social actions, which involved collaborations of multiple individuals...volunteering tends to be more common and stable in communities where a strong cultural norm of trust and civic engagement makes it a natural part of community life and a dense web of civic associations and leaders supply rich opportunities of involvement*” (ibid).

Lower levels of social capital were given by researchers as the most plausible explanation for excess mortality in Glasgow (“*that seemingly not explained by deprivation*” Walsh, et al., 2015) compared with comparable post industrial cities (Manchester and Liverpool). The two measures of social capital used to construct this explanation were: ‘social participation’, indicated by lower rates of formal volunteering in Glasgow than Liverpool and Manchester (ibid) and ‘social support’,



indicated by Glasgow residents being “*twice as likely to report having no one to turn to for help (in relation to: going to the shop for them if unwell; lending them some money for a few days; and giving advice and support in a crisis)*” (ibid).

In terms of ‘social support’, these types of activities would be placed on the left of Woolvin’s spectrum (Fig 1) under ‘informal volunteering’ or ‘helping out’. This study is important because the indicators that are used for social capital highlight the importance of *what is actually happening* in communities (i.e. help being given or received), rather than how people *feel* (i.e. sense of belonging or trust, see for example Ormston 2012, Ferrangina, et al., 2013).

What Walsh et al. show is the community level effect of social participation and social support. Not only does volunteering indicate that other dimensions of community wellbeing are present, it *generates* wellbeing for community members *whether or not they volunteer*. The Commission on Wellbeing and Policy argue strongly for measuring and supporting volunteering due to the “*spillover effects*” of volunteering such as increased feelings of trust and reciprocity – “*if you live in a community with high levels of volunteering, even if you do not volunteer, your subjective wellbeing will still tend to be increased by all that good will and social capital building around you*” (O’Donnell, G., citing Halpern, 2009; see also Timbrell, 2007).

Wilson (2000) identifies a similar spillover effect, arguing that those who volunteer are more likely to “*attach...importance to servicing the public interest as a personal life goal and be more politically active*”. Thus in going about their voluntary activities, individuals are also cultivating an outlook that contributes to a social environment that nurtures the wellbeing of all.

Rates of volunteering participation would therefore provide strong indication whether people actively express reciprocity and trust in their communities, and are generating wellbeing for themselves and those around them.

The Indicator

The above discussion has centred largely on the wellbeing benefits of formal volunteering (with formal volunteering currently being measured through the Scottish Household Survey). Walsh et al., and Lim and Laurence refer to both formal and informal volunteering (e.g. examples of social support, or trust and reciprocity include more neighbourly acts of helping out). Informal volunteering is not currently measured by the Scottish Household Survey.

It is not clear from the existing evidence whether capturing informal volunteering will tell us anything over and above that indicated by a formal volunteering indicator.



However, there is evidence to suggest that informal and formal voluntary activity is distinct, and relatively unrelated (Woolvin). For example, it is unlikely someone volunteering in a charity shop will informally help out their fellow volunteers. There is also some evidence that more deprived neighbourhoods have higher levels of informal volunteering than affluent neighbourhoods. We believe the equality dimension to different types of participation is the strongest argument for developing an informal question, to ensure communities who are not engaged in formal volunteering are not described as 'disengaged'.

There is no existing research that we are aware of that maps the impact of informal activities, although it is likely that they do contribute to a range of benefits, for example the prevention of ill-health (e.g. transporting elderly neighbours to their GP) or enabling employment (e.g. taking neighbour's children to school to allow neighbour to travel to work).

However, Lim and Laurence (2015) found that participation in formal volunteering has the same (if not stronger) relationship with levels of trust as informal participation; lower levels of both formal and informal participation was cited as a plausible reason for excess mortality in Walsh et al. (2015).

The vast majority of volunteers volunteer locally; 86% of those volunteering in Scotland said they carried out their activities within their local authority area (Volunteer Scotland, 2012). The majority of charities carrying out activities operate within one local authority area of operation (Harper and Doyle, 2012). Voluntary and public sector volunteers make up the vast majority of volunteers in Scotland. The current measurement of formal volunteering is capturing volunteering at the local level.

Whilst a combined volunteering indicator (including a measurement of formal and informal volunteering) would help strengthen our understanding of trust, reciprocity and social support within communities, we do not believe it is essential to measure informal volunteering in order to capture Scotland's wellbeing generated by volunteering.

Limitations of Scottish Household Survey

While the Scottish Household Survey does measure volunteering participation at local authority level, these rates fluctuate (in some cases greatly) due to sampling restrictions, meaning they cannot be used as an annual indicator for participation (with the exception of Edinburgh and Glasgow). It is our understanding (through dialogue with the SHS team) that the most appropriate strategy to strengthen the local data is to combine two years worth of data together to boost the sample size.



While the Scottish Household Survey volunteering question is undoubtedly the most robust in Scotland, we believe it needs to be reviewed to ensure that it is capturing as broad a range of participation as policy and practice requires. It is our understanding that the question, developed in the early 2000's was not tested to ensure it captured more transient 'collective' participatory activities (as described above by Ellis Paine et al., 2014, and in the middle sections of Fig 1), such as participation in decision-making, or other democratic participation activities. Given the changed political context in Scotland in recent years it may be fruitful to confirm that it captures as broad a range of participation as current policy and practice requires.

Conclusion

There is strong evidence that volunteering powers wellbeing for individuals and communities. A volunteering indicator is therefore a relevant and appropriate way to measure and monitor wellbeing across Scotland. Volunteering participation is (explicitly or implicitly) a critical component of policy agendas focussing on public service delivery and communities now and for the foreseeable future. We have an opportunity to utilise existing data to help decision-makers and practitioners positively engage with those agendas, to grow participation and enhance wellbeing for all.



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