

Rethinking volunteering in the ‘community’ services industry

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Abstract:

Notwithstanding the fact that virtually all of Tasmania’s funded non-government ‘community’ service organisations (CSOs) began their lives as small, stumbling groups of volunteers, most appear to have forgotten their roots. Some have just drifted away from a reliance on, and appreciation of, volunteers. Others have briskly marched away, championing the transition to paid staff as a sign of ‘professionalism’, of maturity. Many are caught mid-stream, unsure of just what to do with the volunteers they have (including their volunteer Boards and management committees). Meanwhile, those same CSOs are struggling to justify the ‘C’, no longer able to point to a specific community that they are part of and accountable to. This paper argues that the two trends – away from volunteers and away from community accountability – are in fact two sides of the same coin. We contend that CSOs need to rethink their relationships to volunteering, moving from a perception of volunteers as cheap-but-problematic labour to one where the various contributions of volunteers are recognised as integral to community ‘ownership’ of our not-for-profits. The paper points to the emerging research base on community resilience and the importance of multiple entry-points for social inclusion and asks whether our CSOs will be enhancing or inhibiting the active engagement of community members.

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Well done, TasCOSS – it’s terrific to have a conference such as this back in our calendars. May they be regular and frequent!

I want to do three things today. First, I want to suggest that our Community Services Industry, despite having been built on a historical platform of voluntary activity, has no idea what to make of, or do with, volunteers. Second, I will argue that in large part this has resulted from a shared, flawed conception of how community service organisations

should develop – indeed of what community service is. Third, I want to enlist your support as allies, indeed leaders, in the fashioning of a comprehensive Tasmanian volunteering strategy that helps strengthen Tasmania’s volunteering sector – our civil society – a sector that is currently in decline.

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With very few exceptions, the community service organisations attending this conference began life within civil society as small, unincorporated gatherings of volunteers. In general, it is how we build *all* the social structures that assist us to collaboratively tackle our shared concerns.

All of you are still governed by Boards of Directors and Management Committees primarily comprised of volunteers. Many of you recruit and deploy volunteers for service delivery, fund-raising, administration or other roles.

Too few of you, however, take seriously your stewardship of *volunteering*. For some of you, volunteers are a kind of spakfilla, patching the gaps around the *real* stuff that you do – the work done by paid employees. When you come together to discuss the urgent need to address our industry’s workforce development crisis, the volunteer sector is assigned a walk-on, cameo role – a distant, elderly aunt invited to a family Christmas gathering because, well, she’s family, after all.

Some of you do the right thing. You recognise that volunteers are best understood as being the same as your paid workers – just paid even less. That is, they need formal position descriptions, skilled line supervision, access to training, and performance management. They need leave from their duties for all the reasons you do. They need to be reimbursed when out-of-pocket as a result of their volunteering.

Reimbursed like you and your staff, not in some token ‘just-a-volunteer’ way. If you pay yourself a Tax-Office-approved kilometre rate for using your own vehicle, but pay your volunteers only for the fuel component of their expenses, you are applying a clear double-standard. Next time your organisation considers joining in an advocacy initiative based on some conception of ‘equity’, have a think about your own practical interpretation of equity in your workplace.

Volunteers, just like paid staff, engage in activities that have some element of risk to themselves, to the public and, by implication, to your organisation. Some of you know this, and acquire personal accident insurance for your volunteers, and you make sure that your public liability insurance formally embraces the possible impacts of your volunteers. Many of you don’t. Many of you delude yourselves with the notion that you don’t have volunteers, forgetting your governing boards and committees. If you don’t have appropriate insurances you are, once again, applying a double standard. If you, as an employee, are hurt in an accident on the way to work, your workers compensation cover will apply. If your hard-working Honorary Secretary or Treasurer has an accident on his or her way to your Board meeting, you expect that volunteer to cover their own medical expenses and loss of income. *Fairer Futures* means addressing that unfairness, surely. It is our solemn duty as the peak volunteering body to inform you that the community services sector, despite its professed commitment to equity and fairness and social justice and all those other bumper-sticker slogans is *not*, repeat *not*, a leader in the volunteering sector when it comes to managing volunteers. You are, on balance, less likely than the folks in emergency services, sport & rec, arts/culture/heritage or the environment groups to apply the

concept of fairness to your volunteer management practices. Do something about that, please; do something about that.

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How has it come to this? How is it that community service organisations have moved from volunteer-reliant to volunteer-averse? First, let me be clear about what I am *not* asking here. I am not asking why CSOs have grasped the opportunity to employ paid staff to perform service delivery, management and administrative tasks. For the most part, that transition has been a necessary precondition of us maturing into an industry that can reliably deliver high quality services. Demanding, full-time jobs that require specified professional qualifications should be paid, and paid appropriately.

What we *are* asking is why community service organisations have moved away from a role whereby community members could actively support the work of those organisations – where they acted as a vehicle for community activism, a node within a community network, a resource for a range of community development processes?

Our suspicion is that this is yet another example of ‘mission-drift’; CSOs didn’t deliberately abandon this role, they just responded to the overwhelming pressures of their service-delivery role by giving it their undivided attention, ultimately to the exclusion of community development work.

Governance, I hear you say. Governance is where we still provide an opportunity for community members to volunteer their time and creativity to support our work. Yes, and no. Yes, membership of your boards and committees is an important and often overlooked facet of volunteering. The individuals involved build their own skills and understandings as well as the capacity of the organisations they govern.

But no, this role was there from the start, and is rather narrow in its reach into the community you seek to support. Worse, many of you have developed inter-agency governance co-dependencies: my paid staff will sit on your board if yours sit on my board. It is not unusual to look around a board meeting of a funded CSO and fail to find anyone who is not carrying out paid duties on behalf of some other CSO. Leaving aside the potential conflicting interests that these arrangements sometimes generate, this trend has left volunteers without a chair when the music stops.

No, governance doesn't get us off the hook – we all need to take a closer look at our organisations' missions, to look back at the 'objects' written into our constitutions when we began our important work. We need to pose some hard questions, like: 'Are we just about service delivery on behalf of government, or is community development still part of our core business, our identity? Are we enhancing our communities, or inhibiting them?' Again, the issue is not moving roles and tasks from volunteers to paid staff – it is remembering to find new, enriching roles and tasks for volunteers. It is about sustaining their engagement.

For many Tasmanians, whether they have 'Fairer Futures' will be determined by their individual stores of social capital, and the stores held by the communities in which they live. Yes, our 'human capital' reserves – our saleable skills and abilities – will be important too. But our capacity to ride out the turbulence and uncertainty of our rapidly-changing economy and society will be a function of our personal and collective resilience.

That resilience is developed, or not developed, in our interactions with our families and our communities, our schools and our workplaces.

It is a function of the sorts of relationships we have – how many, how diverse, how supportive.

When pressed to explain why we need ‘community services’, most of us offer explanations about the ways in which our changing economies and societies have left individuals without the traditional support structures that had once cushioned the impacts of social change. We lament the breakdown of families and communities and we set about building service systems to augment the diminished relationships in what is left of those families and communities.

In recent times, we have recognised – finally – that families can be supported, not just complemented and substituted. We have accepted that it is good public policy to engage in a wide range of early intervention initiatives that go to the heart of family-formation – *parenting* and other relationship-based processes.

With communities, however, we don’t appear to have worked it out. Instead of strengthening our communities, we still build services instead. Some of them are very fine services, let me hastily add! And many of them would be important irrespective of our best community-building efforts. But not all, and not to the same extent.

In the 1970s, we put a lot of imagination and effort and resources into what we then called ‘community development’. The outcomes were uneven, partly because we didn’t really know much about the process, and partly because important initiatives were cut short when the Fraser Government adopted the Thatcherite ‘no such thing as society’ approach to public policy. For much of the next three decades, the primary focus of public policy was the individual, not the family, not the community.

Not just any individual, mind, but a particular kind of individual. The one who can only be understood in the context of various kinds of *exchange*. The individual as consumer, exchanging their money for goods and services. The individual as labour force participant, exchanging their efforts for money. The individual as voter-for-sale, exchanging their vote for pre-election inducements.

Volunteering Tasmania believes individuals, and families, and communities, even nations, can be better understood by looking at the ways that they *give*, not just the ways in which they exchange. Gradually, governments are beginning to understand this. They are beginning to recognise that we are healthier and happier and even more productive when we lead active lives that include various forms of giving. They are learning, too, that one of the most important ways in which we give is in the community-building work of volunteering. Small, halting steps are being taken toward public policy frameworks that support communities and that support the volunteer-involving civil society groups that energise and give structure to those communities.

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In our recent submission to the Tasmanian Government's budget planning process, Volunteering Tasmania argued that we now need a comprehensive Tasmanian Volunteering Strategy that, for the first time, requires an activist approach by government. We have argued for this because very reliable data sources indicate that volunteering is in serious decline in Tasmania. Tasmanian volunteers collectively contribute over a million *fewer* hours each year than they did in 2000. Whole service systems are now threatened, including parts of our crucially important community care network. The reasons are complex, arising from our changing age structure, our changing labour market, our splintered family

networks, and our tendency to be more mobile and therefore less 'connected'. The solutions will also be complex, and will take time. Our submission, available at our website or by just phoning us for a copy, covers whole-of-government coordination mechanisms, the creation of a dedicated Minister for Volunteering – as in other states – to represent the considerable constituency of 131,000 Tasmanian volunteers, the funding of small grants to assist not-for-profits with the costs of volunteering, and a concerted effort to address the insurance issue to protect this so-valuable asset, our volunteers.

Tasmania's community service organisations are potentially an important part of that complex solution. By changing your focus from volunteers-as-cheap-labour to one where you support volunteering as social inclusion, as community capacity building, as social capital investment, you can make a huge difference to the opportunities available for volunteering.

In the process, you can address other challenges facing industry members. In particular, a revived focus on again being a volunteer-involving organisation will provide you with responses to two expectations that funding bodies are now inclined to impose: that you find meaningful ways to involve your consumers in your quality improvement processes and that you demonstrate the ways in which you are accountable to, owned by, your community. The 'active consumer', participating in service review and service planning processes, is a volunteer. As you establish your consumer input structures, remember that they are now providing you with a service, not the reverse.

Similarly, as you build your volunteer workforce, recognise that these community members are a vitally important conduit between your organisation and the community you serve. Their presence in your

workforce, your governance structures, your fund-raising events and your reference groups is a sign of their support for what you are doing. Government funding agencies are looking for reasons why they should persist with small-to-medium sized community organisations when there are large not-for-profits ready to tender for the services you currently provide. Give them those reasons: show them the level of genuine, *active* support you earn from your team of volunteers; show them the ways in which the volunteering opportunities you have created are pathways to social inclusion for community members otherwise at risk of exclusion. Show them that the collaborations between your organisations and these volunteers are creating new networks, new community structures – not just services.

To conclude: Tasmanian community service organisations, with their genuine, heartfelt commitment to social justice and social inclusion, should be revered exemplars of good practice in the encouragement and management of volunteering. They aren't. They can be, and arguably should be if we are to actually build and maintain communities. Volunteering Tasmania can help community service organisations be better at their engagement with volunteering. In return, community service organisations can help Volunteering Tasmania to turn around the accelerating decline in Tasmanian volunteering, and help us convince our Tasmanian Government that it needs to join us in this important partnership. Thank you for your attention.