

Laying the Foundation for Volunteer Success A base para o sucesso do voluntariado

Susan J. Ellis*

Abstract Volunteering by migrant and immigrant populations has potential benefits and challenges both to the individuals and to the organizations involved. But it must be a collaboration, in which both sides want to work together and are willing to adapt to each other's needs. It is also affected by society at large, which has its own agenda, goals and expectations for wanting to encourage volunteering by populations on the margin. In many ways, volunteering by migrants is no different from that of any other type of volunteering. So the first criterion for success is that an organization already has a strong and effective volunteer management strategy in place, with designated staff leadership and appropriate resources, into which all sorts of people can be welcomed and supported to contribute their talents. With such infrastructure, it becomes feasible to adapt to the possible special needs of migrants. The problem, however, is that not all organizations are ready. This chapter examines the three perspectives that converge in any initiative to recruit migrants and immigrants as volunteers: that of society as a whole, of the individual migrants involved, and of the organization offering volunteer opportunities. For each, it identifies what holds true for any volunteering and then focus on what might be of special relevance to migrants and immigrants.

Keywords Volunteering, volunteer management, migrants, immigrants, social inclusion, organizational readiness

Resumo O voluntariado por populações migrantes e imigrantes tem benefícios potenciais e desafios, tanto para os indivíduos como para as organizações envolvidas. Mas deve ser uma colaboração, na qual ambos os lados queiram trabalhar em conjunto e estejam dispostos a adaptar-se às necessidades um do outro. Também é afectado pela sociedade em geral, que tem a sua própria agenda,

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objectivos e expectativas para querer incentivar o voluntariado por populações à margem. De muitas maneiras, o voluntariado por migrantes não é diferente do de qualquer outro tipo de voluntariado. Assim, o primeiro critério para o sucesso é que a organização já tenha no terreno uma estratégia de gestão de voluntariado forte e eficaz, com uma liderança designada e os recursos adequados, na qual todos os tipos de pessoas podem ser bem recebidas e apoiadas para contribuir com os seus talentos. Com essa infraestrutura, torna-se viável a adaptação às possíveis necessidades especiais dos migrantes. O problema, porém, é que nem todas as organizações estão prontas. Este capítulo examina as três perspectivas que convergem em qualquer iniciativa para recrutar migrantes e imigrantes como voluntários: a da sociedade como um todo, a dos migrantes individuais envolvidos e a da organização que oferece oportunidades de trabalho voluntário. Para cada uma, identifica o que é válido para qualquer voluntariado e depois concentra-se no que pode ser de especial relevância para os migrantes e imigrantes.

Palavras-chave Voluntariado, gestão de voluntários, migrantes, imigrantes, inclusão social, prontidão organizacional

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In 2002-2003, a “transnational exchange programme” across Germany, Austria, Denmark, Holland, France, and the UK studied the volunteering of migrants and ethnic minority communities, or MEM-VOL, as part of the European Commission’s Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion. The resulting reports are available at the MEM-VOL website,¹ which offers an interesting statement to explain the background of the project: *“Until now little is known about volunteering of migrants and ethnic minorities, although kinship and neighborhood networks and ethnic communities are in the focus of research. Volunteering - in favour of their own community or for other groups - might be a means of integration into society in a double sense: e.g. by labour market counselling to facilitate employment or by educational training for children of foreign origin and by developing new skills and qualifications through volunteering. In all member states of the European Union migrants and ethnic minorities suffer from high unemployment. The effects of MEM volunteering as a means of integration - societal, cultural and on the labour market - and as a means of empowerment and development of the civil society is highly underestimated and disregarded. Therefore promoting and facilitating volunteering and self-help of migrants and ethnic minorities will be an important objective to combat social exclusion and poverty.”*²

While the connection between social inclusion and volunteering has great merit, the theory has not fully been put to the test in the real world. Despite government rhetoric, few examples can be found of money and infrastructure directly supporting volunteering by migrants. Where it has been tried, it was due to independent interest by specific organizations. In one review of the MEM-VOL study (Howlett, 2005), it was noted that *“many of the examples focus on organisations specifically working with and for migrants and refugees; there were less initiatives that focused on getting organisations that were not serving migrants to diversify their volunteers to include more migrants.”*

In principle, volunteering by migrant and immigrant populations has benefits and challenges both to the individuals considering voluntary service and to the organizations considering whether or not to actively engage them. But it must be a collaboration, in which both sides want to work together and are willing to adapt to each other’s needs.

In many ways, volunteering by migrants is no different from that of any other type of volunteering. So the first criterion for success is that an organization already has a strong and effective volunteer management strategy in place, with designated staff leadership and appropriate resources, into which all sorts of people can be wel-

comed and supported to contribute their talents. With such infrastructure, it becomes feasible to adapt to the possible special needs of migrants. The problem, however, is that not all organizations are ready.

In this chapter, we'll examine the three perspectives that converge in any initiative to recruit migrants and immigrants as volunteers: that of society as a whole, of the individual migrants involved, and of the organization offering volunteer opportunities. For each, we'll start by identifying what holds true for any volunteering and then focus on what might be of special relevance to migrants and immigrants.

What society wants and needs

What's Generally True

Volunteering is a vital element in what is often referred to as "civil society". Private citizens willing to contribute their time, thinking, hands and minds to improving the communities in which they live can often accomplish far more than government or established institutions can. This is the essence of participatory democracy and the root of social change.

Volunteers will always be on the cutting-edge of change because they see things that should be done before the establishment does. The first individuals who recognized the enormity of AIDS, child abuse, how we treat dying people, and other critical problems were community leaders who mobilized other early volunteers to create care centers, hospices, and the other types of services now fully funded by government and nonprofit foundations.

Ironically, the enormous historical impact of volunteers as mavericks and visionaries is often forgotten; what comes immediately to the public's mind is the image of volunteers as helpful amateurs assisting paid staff. This is because the most visible forms of volunteering are direct-service related. We all see the reception desk volunteer, the youth sports coach, the reading tutor, the thrift shop clerk, the volunteer picking up trash by the side of the road in daily life. Less visible are board members of nongovernmental organizations, political activists, and all those whose voluntary service centers on systems and progress.

In order to consider the value of volunteering by migrants to society, it is critical to understand how diverse volunteering is – in what volunteers do, how they do it, and why they do it. Volunteering is not monolithic. Exactly which type of volunteering do we think we ought to be engaging migrants in?

It is also relevant to point out that volunteering is often *mutual aid*. People with common characteristics or shared needs will find ways to work together towards common goals. Migrants themselves will act collectively when necessary (even if only through a group of families) and – just as every other immigrant population has done around the world – will care "for their own", share necessities of life, and pass along important information about dealing with local authorities.

When voluntary action moves beyond personal, familial, or neighborhood networks and begins to have an impact on the larger community, new organizations are formed, new legislation is championed, and the effort becomes far more inclusive than exclusive.

Not all volunteering is universally seen or received as good. For one thing, people support causes that are controversial or adversarial. Volunteers can be found on both sides of issues, pro and con, fighting for political opponents, and so on. Voluntary service may stem from religious convictions, moral codes, or a range of self interests. Labor unions can perceive unpaid work as threatening to economic advancement. None of this is inherently problematic, but it is important to recognize that volunteering is a *methodology* for accomplishing end results, not an end unto itself.

Further, especially in times of economic crisis, politicians and agency executives tend to turn to volunteering as a cost-saving measure. It simply seems right to spend as little money as possible (at least for such things as human services or the arts) and, if "free labor" is available, why not use it? This is frustrating for everyone because the best solution is *both* sufficient funding *and* dedicated volunteers; those who think volunteers are a cheap workforce, soon discover that it costs real money and time to coordinate them effectively (and it certainly costs the volunteers money to give time, too).

Leaving aside the inherent potential of volunteering by migrants to accomplish many positive things, when governments seek to further this activity, it is relevant to ask *why*. What is the intention behind urging migrant volunteering? Is it sincere desire to tap a new source of skills and energy? Or is it a cover for not wanting to spend money on or do other things to assist this population? Is there danger of exploitation (even unintentional)? Are all the barriers to social inclusion being addressed or just the ones to unpaid service? Are nongovernmental organizations being asked to be proving grounds and training laboratories for populations others do not want to help?

In an ideal world, volunteering can be one of many ways to integrate migrants and immigrants successfully and productively into the community at large. But the positive benefits are not self-evident or inevitable, and require thought and attention.

What's Special for Migrant Volunteers

Just as volunteers cannot be defined by a single characteristic, neither can migrants. Some migrant and immigrant populations are involuntary exiles, fleeing all sorts of threatening conditions and seeking a permanent home. Others are economic migrants, moving about as seasons change to follow paying work, sometimes returning to a home base and other times simply remaining itinerant. Despite common perception, it is inaccurate to consider all migrants unskilled laborers – especially people who have been forced into relocation, leaving behind a very different lifestyle. Some migrate within the borders of their own country while others may travel thousands of miles. Some are seeking permanent homes, but others have chosen a life of moving around.

Whatever the reasons for the traveling lifestyle, it is usually difficult for migrants to integrate with the community at large. This has a ripple effect on all permanent residents in terms of special demands for housing, healthcare, schooling, and the other necessities of daily life. If the migrants speak a language other than the native tongue, a whole other set of obstacles separates them from their new neighbors.

As already noted, migrants engage in mutual aid and self-help for survival. Many willingly respond to the needs of the people they know and who are like themselves. In order to be attracted to and welcomed into mainstream volunteering, however, migrants must seek social integration as well as economic inclusion.

Encouraging volunteering by this diverse population has value but the outcomes will naturally differ for each type of migrant and for each unique individual. Again, ideally, migrant volunteering has the potential to:

- Build social cohesion by allowing migrants and permanent residents to work side by side in a relatively neutral environment on projects of mutual interest
- Speed the integration/assimilation process, particular for refugees wanting to settle permanently
- Teach the native language through practical application
- Offer a wide range of causes and institutions new skills and talents that might otherwise not be available

Volunteering is not a panacea and cannot accomplish all of the above in isolation. It has a vital role to play in addition to paid employment, decent housing, education of children, and receiving needed services.

What volunteers want and need

What's Generally True

All volunteers deserve to benefit from their contributed services. Altruism and selflessness are attributes of *charity*, in which those who have so much give to those who have so little. The best volunteer situation is one of an *exchange*, in which both the giver and the receiver gain something each values. At different times throughout our lives, we all need help of some sort; at other times, we all discover we can assist someone else.

Volunteering – for everyone – is a way to:

- Make a difference and campaign for causes that matter to us
- Learn new skills or apply what we already know in new ways
- Make new friends
- Explore careers and build a résumé
- Expand our world view
- Use free time productively (for those few who *have* free time, of course)
- Enjoy ourselves
- Be a part of something bigger than ourselves

The list of benefits is much longer than this, but it is clear that volunteering is a choice to use our time in ways that we often cannot do through our paid jobs, family obligations, or other avenues.

Migrants are not the only special group for whom volunteering has heightened value. Outreach initiatives have long been taken to engage people with disabilities (physical and mental), school dropouts, criminal offenders, and others who share with migrants the stigma of being “different” from the mainstream. As well as all the benefits enjoyed by any volunteer, it is significant for groups on the margin to have the chance to learn or prove their skills. Volunteering provides a relatively low risk opportunity to test the waters of a work environment, possibly leading to paid employment in the future (although a paying job should not be presented as moving “up” from a volunteer role that has meaning in and of itself).

Being successful in giving volunteer service demonstrates that such populations are themselves talent pools, not simply “clients” always in need of services from others. It instills pride and educates the general population to avoid negative stereotypes about such people.

What's Special for Migrant Volunteers

In addition to all the reasons why volunteering can be important to the doer, there are some benefits of significant value to migrants. Volunteering can offer:

- A way to fit into the community and, if the migrant stays, to integrate naturally with others
- A degree of stability in a temporary world. If the person remains a migrant, volunteering may be a way to develop continuity from place to place though learning a volunteer role that can be reapplied in different communities.
- The chance to prove employability, particularly in terms of positive work habits such as dependability, teamwork, etc.
- Practice using the new language of the new location
- References for job, housing or loan applications
- Mentors to offer advice and support
- Pride and increased self-esteem at being a giver of service to others

Most migrants and immigrants need paying work, and it may be very puzzling why anyone expects them to give away their time without financial compensation. So whoever does outreach to traveling populations must expect to discuss what volunteering is and why it is worthwhile. Further, someone who is a new or temporary resident is probably uninformed about the organizations and services in the community and what volunteer opportunities are available. So the interface between migrants and volunteer opportunities requires strategic attention and probably some new recruitment techniques.

Whether or not migrants try volunteering may depend on who suggests it to them. If there is mistrust of government officials, skepticism about the motives of employment counselors, or resentment at the attitudes of perceived do-gooders, the outreach is likely to fail. Conversely, if the recruitment message is presented by currently-active migrant volunteers, a trusted religious community leader, or someone else well-liked, the chance for success increases.

Of critical importance is what happens to each person when he or she takes the big step of contacting an organization to apply for a volunteer position. Many migrants (again, not all) are not accustomed to applying for jobs in a formal way or even as in individual, and may be surprised at what organizations expect when screening volunteers. Filling in an application form, being interviewed, and answering a wide range of questions may be intimidating – even more so if the applicant is new to the language or has limited literacy. Today, a volunteer application may require criminal or child abuse background checks, which clearly means putting one's identity into the official system. Not only might this be frightening to a migrant, but the very nature of moving about may limit the information in

a permanent record, resulting in a negative report that inaccurately labels the person as suspect.

The out-of-pocket expenses of volunteering should not be overlooked, though they rarely are counted as contributions to the organization on the balance sheet. For most migrants, the cost of transportation to the site, possible child care, or getting appropriate clothing may be unaffordable. This means an organization might need to offer expense reimbursement.

Unless the reality of what it takes to become a volunteer is understood by those managing the migrant volunteering project, the experience of applying may be so negative as to stop engagement before it even starts.

Assuming that the induction hurdle is successfully overcome, the new volunteer will still need a degree of mentoring. One does not transform from feeling like an outsider – or being treated like one – to joining or being welcomed into a community quickly. This is a challenge the host organization must meet and factors heavily into whether or not a migrant volunteer will derive the benefits from the opportunity that make the effort worthwhile for both parties.

Once volunteering has started, migrants and immigrants may need extra help in translating their experience to other parts of their lives. This goes back to what the volunteer wanted when she or he first applied and what the organization offered to provide. For example, if volunteering is expected to be a way into the paid job market, someone will need to work with the migrant volunteer to assure that employable skills are being learned and then to write a résumé that describes the service activity in vocabulary relevant to potential employers.

What the receiving organization wants and needs

What's Generally True

Despite the long and universal tradition of volunteer innovation and involvement in social change and the formation of non-governmental organizations – and volunteer contributions to causes as varied as disaster relief, health care, education, youth sports, human rights, and cultural arts – engagement of volunteers is too often invisible at an executive level. Organization leaders seek to improve their skills in how to raise money, influence government, and manage employees. It is just as important to learn the best practices of working with volunteers day to day.

An organization that struggles to recruit quality volunteers from the general population or is not already effectively putting volunteer talents to work on behalf of its mis-

sion is hardly likely to be able to welcome migrants and immigrants as volunteers. So let's take a moment to consider the state of volunteer management today.

What Volunteers Contribute

Successful volunteering does not come from spontaneous combustion. Most organizations are complex and, unless clear ways are developed for volunteers to participate in activities, people really do not know how they can contribute. Or worse, they start doing all sorts of things that are not helpful at all. Involving volunteers *in the right way* offers endless opportunities for accomplishing many things, while inattention to volunteer involvement can waste everyone's time and energy. It is a form of volunteer recognition to establish standards for who can become a volunteer, how assignments are made, and whether accomplishments will be evaluated. The best volunteer program management serves to *enable* volunteer achievement, not limit it.

The first step is *vision*. *Why* are volunteers wanted in the first place? Is it mainly because there is not enough money to pay staff? If lack of funds is the major reason for wanting volunteers, they will always be viewed as a poor alternative, a "second choice," to the additional employees really wanted. But there are some significant "first choice" reasons to engage volunteers. There are unique things that volunteers can offer that are different from what employees contribute, such as: credibility with the public because they do not personally profit from the funds raised; expanded spheres of influence; diversity of experiences and skills; the luxury to focus on one client or project while the paid staff must divide their time among all the work to be done; fostering a sense of neighborliness and community that can only come from equals helping equals; and more.

Executives must have the conviction that volunteers are important; that they are:

- The "unpaid personnel" department – part of the human resources that make the organization work.
- Part of the organization's "brain." While common symbols of volunteering are hearts and hands, the most effective volunteers also offer their minds and voices. When volunteers are valued for the skills and ideas they add to those of the paid staff, the synergy permits all sorts of progress.
- "Time donors" whose contributions parallel those of money donors. It makes great sense to approach both fundraising and volunteer development as *people-raising* or *friend-raising*. Each contributes to the "community resource mix" of an organization. The same people may give both funds and time, either simultaneously or alternating their engagement as their life cycle permits.

The overall goal is a wide circle of continuing *supporters*, of which volunteers are an active, hands-on corps.

- Unique in enabling an organization to experiment with or test new service/program ideas before attempting to raise funds to enlarge and maintain them.
- A source of vital input from the community, offering points of view quite different from that of the paid staff and often more informed about the perspective of the people served. Conversely, volunteers are enthusiastic ambassadors for the organization back to the community, if they are satisfied with their work (another reason to make sure of that satisfaction!).

Organizations that look at volunteer involvement in these ways will develop the management infrastructure to assure the potential is unleashed.

Planning before Recruitment

A common mistake of newcomers to volunteer management is to rush into recruiting the first volunteers. This is based on the belief that it will be hard to attract volunteers and so the important thing is to actually have some in hand and then figure out how best to utilize them. In fact, the opposite is true. Only when an organization is clear on what it needs volunteers to do, and has a plan for how volunteers will be supported, does it make sense to go public with a recruitment plea.

It should come as no surprise that good volunteer management requires the setting of goals and objectives for what volunteer involvement will accomplish. There is no reason to let abounding gratitude for donated volunteer time restrain an organization from setting standards of achievement. Note, too, that volunteers usually prefer to have some way to assess their service contribution and welcome stated goals.

It possible and desirable to be proactive and intentional in framing what the organization most wants – and then develop the strategies to make that vision a reality.

Executives will frequently express goals in terms of head count: How many volunteers are active and are there more this year than last year? Such numerical data does not self-evidently mean better service delivery or greater impact. Some organizations would actually be better off cutting their volunteer corps in half and holding those remaining to higher standards! A much better approach is first to determine what is going to be done in the coming year by the whole organization and which part of that might be accomplished by volunteers. In order to achieve these goals, how many hours of service by qualified volunteers will be needed? The number of volunteers desired is a strategy determined by expectations of productivity.

The action steps of planning for volunteers include:

- *Conducting a “task analysis” of the work* to be done to determine how it can be broken down into manageable pieces that a variety of people can do in a few hours a week or during the course of a month.
- *Developing a range of specific volunteer position descriptions* so that prospective volunteers are offered options for service to match their skills and time availability to the needed tasks.
- *Deciding what the volunteer corps should look like.* Who volunteers now and is this, the demographic profile needed to move forward? Do volunteers represent the clients/audiences served? Will only people who already have the skills needed be recruited as volunteers, or can willing novices be trained to do any of the work? What about people with clout in the community? What is wanted in terms of diversity of gender, age, race, or other characteristics? Only when target populations are determined is it possible to design work and plan a recruitment campaign to find these types of volunteers.
- *Determining what work will volunteers do and not do, and why.* What criteria will be used to determine assignment areas? How can executives assure that staff are finding the best ways to put volunteer skills to work? Will volunteers be assigned to top-level work as well as supplemental tasks?
- *Setting expectations for what volunteers will accomplish.* “Having” volunteers is not an end unto itself. What is the purpose of volunteer assignments? What outcomes should volunteers achieve? How will success be evaluated?

It should be evident that organizations that have done this sort of planning for any volunteer will be most likely to find meaningful ways to involve migrants as a special talent pool.

Who Is in Charge?

The earlier section on what migrant volunteers might need introduced how important it is to have someone on board who can welcome and support them. So one of the most critical questions for an organization to answer is: *Who will be designated with the responsibility for leading volunteer involvement?* Even if many people share the work of recruiting and supervising volunteers, someone needs to define procedures, coordinate the work, maintain records, and keep everyone on track.

The question of project leadership in turn raises sub-questions:

- Who will interview, screen, and place candidates? (And what criteria will be used for these important decisions?)
- Who will orient and train volunteers—and what do they need to be taught in order to do the work?
- Who will prepare and supervise volunteer work? (Sometimes this is as simple—and as difficult—as making sure that there is always someone available to answer volunteers’ questions.)
- Who will evaluate the effectiveness of volunteer performance and who will thank volunteers for their time and effort?

Designating leadership must be accompanied by a budget and other resources to be effective.

Volunteers are definitely not “free” labor, even if the amount of funds needed are less than if hiring employees. What resources will be allocated to support volunteers? Consider money for program expenses, staff supervision time, meeting and work space, reimbursement for volunteer out-of-pocket costs, etc. One way an organization demonstrates its commitment to volunteers is to acknowledge that such expenses are real and plan for them in the overall organizational budget—or raise the necessary funds as soon as possible.

Volunteer/Employee Relations

Unfortunately, one of the universal issues of volunteer management in all types of settings is tension between volunteers and employees. Never assume that people know how to work effectively with volunteers—or that they are happy to do so. Most employees do not learn about volunteer management in their professional education, nor is personal experience being a volunteer enough to teach someone how to supervise other volunteers. Organizations must develop a plan to deal with possible staff resistance to volunteers and prepare everyone to work together, including training in the best ways to support volunteers.

Note as well that sometimes the problem is the way volunteers themselves interact. There can be tension between long-time volunteers and newcomers, or misunderstandings based on age, perceived status, or any other variable. This has important implications when adding migrants into an existing corps of volunteers.

Good management practices should limit problems, but the unexpected will happen. How does the organization react to a problem involving a volunteer? Can a volunteer be “fired” if his or her performance is below standard or disruptive? Is there enough commitment to the value of volunteer involvement that staff will not over-react if one individual makes a mistake? Are proper risk management procedures in place? Are legal liabilities regarding volunteers understood and written policies and procedures disseminated to protect the organization, clients and volunteers?

Formality vs. Informality

One of the reasons organizations are reluctant to develop a strong infrastructure to engage volunteers is that it sounds needlessly bureaucratic. Are so many decisions, policies, and guidelines really necessary simply to ask members of the community to help out? Another reason is concern that too many rules will turn off prospective volunteers who would prefer a more informal way of contributing their time.

Creating a *structure* through which to welcome volunteers does not require rigidity or even great formality. The tone and spirit can (and should) be open and welcoming. The key is to develop the approach most appropriate for the culture of the organization and for what volunteers will be doing. Ideally, finding the right balance of consistent procedures will allow citizen participation to flourish in dynamic and creative ways.

There are a number of viable options for how to organize volunteer involvement, each with a different level of formality, any of which can occur in the same setting:

- *Most formal:* Volunteers work side-by-side with employees in various roles, generally treated as unpaid staff and brought on board with position descriptions, applications and screening interviews, assigning them to a staff member for supervision, etc. Within this model, volunteers might give time:
 - On site on a regular schedule over many weeks, months, or years
 - On site whenever needed over the course of a year
 - To complete a short-term project with a specific goal or product
 - Virtually on a schedule they each choose for themselves
 - As a consultant or advisor, through meetings to plan work and then completing it off-site on their own schedule
- *Moderately formal:* Ongoing projects in which groups of volunteers basically work with one another to accomplish an activity on behalf of but not directly connected to the daily work of the organization. There are one or more coordinators, usually employees but sometimes also lead volunteers. A common example is running a gift or thrift shop to produce revenue for the charity. Vol-

unteers have to apply, be trained, pick a schedule, and so on, but the parent organization’s primary service is not affected one way or another.

- *Informal:* Periodic projects or single days of service designed to get a big job done (usually involving some form of physical labor) with as many participants as possible. Here people might be able to simply show up to help, with nothing more than a sign-in sheet to record their participation and basic instructions before starting the work. Examples are park or beach clean-ups, marathons and other fundraising events, etc.

Of course, even the most informal of projects – from the volunteer’s perspective – also require planning, coordination, resources, and leadership. In general, the higher the degree of formality, the more intellectual skills are put to use and the closer the volunteer comes to direct interaction with clients and employees.

What’s Special for Migrant Volunteers

The issue of formality vs. informality may be important in planning how to engage migrants and immigrants as volunteers, both in terms of likelihood of success for the organization’s needs and to be supportive of the migrants themselves. Considerations include:

- *Third party involvement:* Who has initiated the outreach to/from the migrant group? Is it something that has evolved from natural interaction in the community, or is it rooted in a political agenda, government scheme, religious charity, or funder’s vision? If an outside body, public or private, takes an active role in fostering volunteering by migrants, the project is more likely to have formal elements, at a minimum, eligibility requirements and recordkeeping/reporting.
- *Suspicion or skepticism:* If either side is uncertain as to whether the volunteering initiative is workable, starting off with a well-run informal project will serve to introduce everyone and test the water for further efforts.
- *Literacy and language skills:* If the migrants have trouble speaking the native language and/or are unable to read or write well, starting with volunteer work that can be done with minimal words makes sense. Also, in group activities, as long as some of the participants are bilingual, the rest of the group can spend the time speaking their own language. Of course, if the goal of volunteering is to practice the new language, keeping migrants in groups on their own will be self-defeating – better to mix migrants and permanent residents together on smaller teams during the event.

- *Preparation for employment or recreational activity:* If the volunteering is expected to offer transferable training in identified skills, serve as an internship, or demonstrate that the migrant has good work habits, it will almost always be a formal project. Conversely, something arranged for pleasure during leisure hours will gravitate towards the informal.
- *With or without spouses and children:* Some migrants, usually men, travel alone to seek a pay check to send home to their families, while others travel as a family, with members of all ages. The greater the diversity of the volunteer pool, particularly a wide age range, the more likely that an informal model of service will work best.

Only a few organizations need hundreds or even dozens of new volunteers at the same time, so acceptance of a migrant into a volunteer position comes down to an individual decision. If an organization has a well-functioning system for any type of donated service, it should be relatively straightforward to put anyone into the best volunteer role for that person's and the agency's needs. An applicant who happens also to be a migrant can be personally assessed and supported. If the scale increases to wanting many migrants to volunteer at once, or for many organizations at the same time, the challenges obviously multiply.

It is always dangerous to make assumptions about the skills or interests of any demographic group. Not all seniors resist technology, not all teenage boys like sports, and not all migrants offer the same talents. Organizations must resist stereotypes and be open to talking with each migrant about his or her background. As noted earlier, some people are traveling because they are fleeing a negative situation at home and may have strong occupational skills. Some will have a flair for language and pick up the new tongue quickly. Even those who travel by choice may have unexpected side interests that lead to great volunteer service, such as musical or artistic talent, or a love of reading. They may not realize that, as a volunteer, they can be of service to others using such abilities.

Finally, particularly if an organization is dealing with human services or healthcare, it is worthwhile to speak to any volunteer applicant about his or her personal experience with the cause being addressed. For example, has the person dealt with a relative who has cancer, dementia, or some sort of disability? If so, empathy might become the basis for creating a meaningful volunteer assignment for that person. Such experiences are as common among migrants as about any other group of people.

For any individual, choosing where to volunteer is even more complex than choosing where to apply for a paying job. For a migrant, the decisions include:

- Do I understand what volunteering is all about and am I interested in seeking this sort of activity?
- Do I want to get involved with organizations that mainly help other migrants or with those that have a broader focus including many different types of people?
- What causes or issues do I care about enough to give my time and energy to without concern for pay?
- How much time do I have for volunteering?
- Will volunteering help me find a paying job? Will it keep me learning new things to help me on whatever job I have?
- If I do not have a job but seek volunteer work, will it affect my public assistance benefits?
- Do I want to volunteer on my own, with a friend, with my family, or as part of a group?
- Am I seeking regular volunteer work I can do on a weekly or month schedule? A short-term project? A single day of service?
- What do I like to do in my spare time and might volunteering let me do more of it?
- Am I confident in my language and literacy skills already or would I like the chance to practice those through volunteering?
- Am I comfortable approaching volunteering much as a job-seeking process, with an application, interview, background checks, orientation and training, supervision, and so on? Or would I prefer something much less formal, not requiring the sharing of much personal information?
- Can I afford the financial costs of volunteering?

Most migrants and immigrants will need help in articulating such questions before they can determine their answers. This may be true of the general public, as well, but it has to be front and center with migrants. Preparing migrants with the mindset of a volunteer implies mentoring – possibly a whole area of new volunteering by permanent residents or, even better, by those who were migrants at an earlier point in their lives. The caution, however, is to avoid paternalism. Migrants may be new to formal volunteering, but not to work or community.

What organizations *serve* migrants? Do they engage volunteers in delivering those services and are they natives or migrants themselves? The MEM-VOL report referenced earlier concluded that (Howlett, 2005): “*volunteer-involving organisations still have some way to go to increase diversity. If volunteering is to help integration, more opportunities will need to be filled by people new to the country – although... when working with some groups a gradual process is necessary whereby migrants take the first step towards integration by first volunteering within organisations from their own community.*”

Organizations are likely to want to pilot test a migrant volunteering project by starting small. It's reasonable to do a trial run, but not to attempt the effort with only a single volunteer. Who wants to climb the mountain of being the first and only representative of any group? It is always better to recruit two to five pioneers together, giving them the opportunity to support each other and avoiding stereotyping a whole population of potential volunteers from the actions of a lone individual.

The most important factor in individual volunteer success is *comfort level*. No one has to volunteer; it is a choice as something meaningful to do in one's free time. If it is acknowledged that most migrants feel excluded from mainstream activities, why should they assume volunteering will be any more welcoming? Therefore it takes courage to raise your hand without being sure of the reception. Each migrant considering taking the first step into volunteering needs:

- Clear information about what volunteering is, how someone can get involved, and where to look
- Confidence that she or he has some talent or skills to share that others will value
- A friendly reception at first contact
- Assistance from someone who will be patient in explaining the procedures of the agency (such as why certain questions might be on an application form)
- To be matched to a volunteer position best suited to his or her experience and interests
- Orientation and training to do the work well – and introductions to paid staff and the other volunteers
- Feedback on how the work was done and what it meant to the recipient
- Sincere thanks for the contributions made

Coming full circle, this list is really not so different from what any volunteer deserves and wants. Which is why the best volunteer programs have the least trouble expanding to accommodate all sorts of people, including migrants.³

Notes

¹ www.mem-volunteering.net

² <http://www.mem-volunteering.net/index1.html>

³ For more information on volunteer management in general, see the many free materials offered at Energize, Inc.'s website, www.energizeinc.com, particularly the online Volunteer Management Resource Library.

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