

Volunteering in Argentina: Another matter pending *Voluntariado na Argentina: Outro assunto pendente*

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In Argentina, there may be no sense in talking about the point where voluntary work and migration meet, given that, originally, voluntary work in Argentina was done by the children of migrants who were in a good social and economic position and had time to devote to charity work. They worked in silence and did it as a sort of *charitable priesthood* from the members of the upper class to the always dispossessed, the lower classes, the farm labourers, the illiterate, the immigrants who didn't speak the language when they arrived in the country.

With time, with institutional advances and the development of the country, things were changing. Carlos García, author of the *History of Volunteering in Argentina*, says: "*Volunteering was born in Argentina - and it is good to recognize and accept that - like a manifestation of the most pure material and cultural paternalism, where those who could - that is to say who have a good position, education, economic solvency, free time and above all a very good heart - spent time giving something back to those who had nothing, it was all needed and few knew*".

It was top down volunteering, with a moralistic notion of poverty and exclusion.

As with the country and society, Volunteering crossed various authorities: it was always those people who had resources who worked voluntarily with those who had no economic resources, education, access to opportunities. With time, its paradigms were changed and Argentinean society began bit by bit to understand volunteering from another perspective, especially since the return to democracy in 1983, after the Military Dictatorship which had governed the country since 1976. And it began to be seen as a different kind of tool.

With the arrival of the 90s, the increase in neoliberal policies began to leave millions of people permanently out of the system. And the individualist attitude began to prevail in most of society. Solidarity was not a word in the vocabulary of the Argentinian people. This point is where volunteering changes its paradigm once more. Carlos García says: "*The occasional volunteer intended to work with people who had already been left right out of a good part of society (economic, cultural, consumer, civic, etc.) and the practice of social volunteering can operate as a bridge; it can contribute to social reintegration rather than making it worse - we know - converting vulnerability into marginality*".

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Once the 90s bubble burst, the 2001 crisis came along, when the citizens came out into the streets to demand the resignation of then President Fernando De La Rúa. Among the reasons were: high unemployment, a one to one parity between the dollar and the peso which seemed unreal, limited local production, lots of imports. Then people began to talk about solidarity again because poverty levels were rising and not stopping. And the middle and lower classes began to get closer to each other. Argentinean citizens started participating and getting involved in acts of solidarity, becoming part of groups in similar circumstances. This opens up the idea for Argentines to begin to understand that volunteering can be an excellent way for them to learn citizenship and also because it puts them closer to realities which in other ways they would never have known.

In any case, these volunteers, beyond being seen today as never before in Argentina collecting signatures to implement laws, fighting against pollutant mining, campaigning against human trafficking, the cutting down of woods, deforestation, co-operation with child feeding centres, which make sure that many children eat every day, co-operating with people living in the streets, cannot resolve social problems.

And that is maybe also something that Argentinean society still doesn't understand. They see a volunteer in the same way as a social entrepreneur or environmental leader. Argentinean society still sees volunteers as part of the charity universe, of helping others and not from the perspective from which volunteers see themselves when they volunteer and how this impacts society.

The motivations we see behind voluntary work include, among other things, helping those most in need, doing an unselfish job (volunteers earn nothing for their work), the search for a positive objective, or even the people who you look after while you volunteer as much as for the cause you are working for. Thus, the volunteer strengthens the social function every citizen has, widens his own vision, and, at the same time, optimizes and enhances the work of the organizations through actions involving various people in developing a specific, caring job.

When an individual provides hours of volunteer work in an altruistic and caring way he is exercising a social or environmental function which comes from the premise that we are all equally responsible for the course of the society we live in.

In this way, the volunteer finds a way of participating in social decisions which have to do with the destiny of groups marginalized by society or the causes related to the environment by those who provide them.

And this voluntary work is, at this height of our Argentinian and world history, one of the few - if not the only job - which is not governed by market laws, market laws which only take into account the flow of money and not the flow of social capital.

And it is this flow of social capital which generates and increases voluntary work. This translates into help in child or community kitchens, organizations dedicated to community education, young entrepreneurship, art, inclusion, environment, gender, HIV groups in poverty, and infinite consequences of exclusion which today include a significant percentage of the country.

Even imagining the best of worlds, the work done by volunteers is indispensable; even if we lived in a world without poverty, without environmental conflicts, without war or hunger, volunteers are essential now that their labour is not linked to the resolution of social evils but rather to a human necessity that cannot be put off to be with the other.

In our country, a Volunteering Law was passed a few years ago and I think that it still has not been implemented (that is to say, it cannot be applied comprehensively).

And although Argentina has a substantial culture of caring and social co-operation, despite a scarce systematization of the experience and a poor legislative framework, the impetus with which each volunteer applies themselves to their job must be reflected in the rest of society.