The Role of Volunteering as an Integral Part of Community Development in Northern Ireland

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1.0 Introduction

Overall this paper will argue that building stronger, healthier and more active communities is facilitated through the process of community development work of which volunteering is a fundamental part. The paper has been split into four key sections:

1. The value, purpose and expectations of a strategic framework for community development for NI;

2. The significance, value and contribution that volunteering makes to community development;

3. Case studies which showcase the contribution volunteers are making to the goals of community development;

4. The current context for community development within volunteering including the policy relevance.
2.0 The value, purpose and expectations of a strategic framework for community development for NI

A strategic framework for community development could provide a clear value base around which developmental work in communities\(^1\) is carried out; setting a common purpose, structure and direction for community development work in Northern Ireland. This could offer an agreed framework around which multi-disciplinary activities are carried out to meet common goals. It is vital that volunteering is recognised as a fundamental part of any community development framework and as a strategically important element of it. There is an inextricable link between volunteering as a multifaceted activity and community development as a process. Volunteering happens in many different forms and can be carried out on a continuum of informality to formality. Both are equally valuable and contribute in a myriad of ways to building communities where people can feel happy, safe and fulfilled.

\(^1\) Communities can be defined by geography; however, they can also be defined by a shared interest or identity (RCN-Community Development Fact Sheet 1).
The significance, value and contribution that volunteering makes to community development

3.0 The significance, value and contribution that volunteering makes to community development

The National Occupational Standards definition of Community Development is “...a long–term value based process which aims to address imbalances in power and bring about change founded on social justice, equality and inclusion ” (Federation for Community Development Learning, No Date)

Volunteers as individuals and groups contribute to the process of community development “by committing time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, the environment or individuals outside or in addition to ones immediate family. It is undertaken freely and without concern for financial gain.” (Department for Social Development, 2011)

Volunteers are integral to achieving the aims which the process of community development is seeking to realise. Volunteering is one of the main conduits through which the principles and values of community development can be implemented.

Volunteering is an organic activity which has been happening since time emmorial. The social anthropological studies which have been carried out on primitive tribes in the last 50 years continue to describe egalitarian societies where kinship groups and social groups are formed on the basis of sharing limited resources, having mutual interests and being lead by collective action. In the Victorian era, before the establishment of the welfare state, families and neighbours supported each others’ health and social care as a response to unmet needs with their ‘communities’.

“It has only been because of mutual support and mutual action that people have been able to survive across the generations. In fact in the 19th century it was the mutual groups that created the embryo of the welfare state” (Rt Hon David Blunkett MP- Creative Extremists Conference NI, 2009).

The importance and strength of kinship and social ties that bond people together has changed with the modernisation of the economic, political, cultural and social norms of societies. Today, ‘communities’ defined by geography is a much more transient phenomenon as people now have the need and ability to relocate for work, education and social reasons. It is also more difficult to develop a sense of ‘community’ based on geography, ‘even though more people than ever are physically packed together (..), they are becoming more rather than less isolated socially’ (Rochester et al. 2010).
The significance, value and contribution that volunteering makes to community development

Why defining volunteering is important

It has only been in more modern times that definitions have been used to describe activities such as volunteering and the process of community development as contributing to positive change in communities, particularly the most deprived communities.

Defining volunteering as an activity is important for many reasons, not least because since the 19th century, volunteering as an activity has developed into a highly dynamic and varied form of civic engagement, as Ellis et al. (2010) categorisation attests to. Furthermore, identifying people as volunteers is important because it recognises people for the work that they do and helps build solidarity between people working towards a common goal. Volunteers are uniquely different from paid workers and this should be recognised, they are different in the sense that they are not being financially remunerated for the work they do and are therefore first and foremost motivated by desire to contribute to social need, build up skills and / or connect with others. Identifying volunteers also means that they can more easily access support and guidance from the volunteering infrastructure with regards to recognition and effective volunteer management i.e. recruitment, selection, support, management and dealing with legal issues around involving volunteers.

Five form categorisation of volunteering

(1) Self help and mutual aid- people with shared problems, challenges and conditions working together to address or ameliorate them.

(2) Philanthropy and service to others- It typically involves an organisation recruiting volunteers to provide some kind of service to others and is the type of activity which most people recognise as volunteering.

(3) Governance- volunteers who provide leadership and direction to groups or organisations.

(4) Advocacy or campaigning- collective action aimed at securing or preventing change which includes campaigning against developments seen to be damaging to the environment.

(5) Expressive Behaviours- expressing their interest and passion in a particular field through volunteering (Ellis et al. 2010).

A community development framework must offer a clear structure around which volunteering can be positioned and recognised, as a way of achieving successful community development. It is important that people are given the opportunity to ‘identify their own needs and aspirations’, to take action to exert influence on the decisions
The significance, value and contribution that volunteering makes to community development

which affect them and to be facilitated to find ways to improve the quality of their own lives, the communities in which they live, and societies of which they are a part. Experience has shown that the most effective and sustainable community development programmes are those which involve local people at all stages. The times of ‘parachuting people’ into communities, especially paid staff to do things to a community rather than support them to do things for themselves has shown to be an ineffective model. Local people are more likely to invest in a programme of work and be actively engaged with it if they are given ownership and meaningful ways of being involved. A recent academic paper by Geoghegan and Powell warns that in Ireland although voluntarism is numerically strong, their still remains questions over the quality of engagement with local people as volunteers (2011). Volunteering research supports this view that attracting and retaining people to volunteer is more successful when people are offered opportunities to carry out meaningful roles which suit their interests and skills.

The role of volunteers in complementing the work of community development staff

Paid workers have an important role to play in supporting community development, as professional experts. However, the long term benefits of community development work are not possible without the engagement of local people who are experts in the social problems and needs of their own communities. Engagement can come in many different forms, from attending a residents meeting to being an activist who leads on community work. Obviously the more committed and rooted local people are in the strategic and practical aspects of developmental work the better. The last State of the Sector survey that was carried out by NICVA showed that of the 26,737 staff in the Community and Voluntary Sector 2,597 people are employed in the area of community development. This equates to 10% of the sector’s workforce, (NICVA, 2010: section 9). There are 87,723 volunteers in the sector as a whole, with 15,109 volunteering in the sub sector of community development. In proportional terms this equates to 3 volunteers to every 1 staff member within the Community and Voluntary Sector as a whole. Or 6 volunteers to every staff member in the community development sub sector.
The significance, value and contribution that volunteering makes to community development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Volunteers</th>
<th>Ratio of staff to volunteers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Voluntary Sector</td>
<td>26,737</td>
<td>87,723</td>
<td>1: 3 (.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Development Sub Sector</td>
<td>2,597</td>
<td>15,109</td>
<td>1: 6 (5.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(source: NICVA 2010- State of the Sector V)

Volunteering is relevant to all spheres of life and volunteers are making a positive impact on economic, social, cultural and environmental issues. Volunteering can empower people and communities to fulfil their potential and contribute to social change. It can also engender a greater sense of ownership of ‘bettering’ their community. Local people hold the insight and knowledge of local issues which is useful when planning programmes of work with community development professionals. Constructive engagement can lead to positive developments in terms of health, job creation, innovation and crime prevention (Davis, 2007). Volunteering itself is good for individual health and the more engaged communities are as a collective, the healthier they become socially and economically (Volunteering England, 2008). Volunteer activity provides a network of social relationships that connect people to each other and their communities. It is this connection that is vital to building democratic, healthy and self sustaining communities.

Arguably some of the most significant and valuable impacts that come from volunteering are in relation to building skills, relationships, bonds and having positive outcomes. These are some of the key aims which community development workers will seek to build:

- **Social Capital** - building co-operative relationships, building connections;
- **Human Capital** - building knowledge, skills and confidence;
- **Physical Capital** - delivering good and services, and
- **Cultural Capital** - having a sense of ones own identity and understanding of others, sense of belonging to a group (Institute for Volunteering Research, 2010).

The economic value of volunteering in Northern Ireland has been estimated as £504 million per year (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007). This is a notional figure based on volunteer time being equated to the national minimum wage (NMW). The value

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2 It is estimated that there are approximately 282,000 formal volunteers in Northern Ireland.

3 At the time State of the Sector was produced the NMW was £11.49.
The significance, value and contribution that volunteering makes to community development which volunteers bring to community development work cannot be measured in economic terms alone (economic capital).

There are four key stakeholder groups that volunteering can make a difference to, these are the volunteers, organisations, beneficiaries and the wider community. Volunteers themselves can develop skills or qualities, such as self confidence as a result of volunteering. A report which looked at the impact of volunteering for those involved in the community services of the Belfast City Council found that people who were involved as volunteers increased their range of friendships, participation in local activities and social gatherings (Volunteer Now, 2010:3). There is a growing body of evidence showing volunteering as a useful way of maintaining social networks and benefiting the health of older people. As the 50 and over age group are an increasing proportion of the population it is important to find creative and meaningful ways of utilising their skill as well as maintaining their civic engagement (Volunteering England, 2008).

There is also evidence that by involving volunteers, organisations are better able to fulfil their aims and develop a more diverse workforce. Volunteering often involves people in community work who would not necessarily have been involved in it in any other capacity i.e. through employment, as a user etc. Volunteers can bring added value to organisations by offering flexibility in terms of their commitment i.e. giving time outside of core 9-5 business hours. It can also connect people who would be unlikely to have met in any other walk of life and translates into a greater range of skills, and perspective that can be drawn upon (Volunteer Development Agency, 2001).

The beneficiaries are the people who benefit from the outcomes of the work which volunteers have contributed to. A befriending scheme is a good example of the positive change that volunteers can bring to those in need. In a recent evaluation of a befriending scheme for older people at risk of social exclusion, clients found that the activities they took part in through the one to one befriending, offered a vital link to the community, reinforced their ability to cope with day to day life and had been instrumental in helping them to develop skills, build confidence, self esteem and make new friends (Volunteer Now, 2011).

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4 There have been a number of Impact Assessment Reports carried out in Volunteer Involving organisations in NI which demonstrate the building of capitals. These can be downloaded from http://www.volunteernow.co.uk/supporting-organisations/measuring-impact/volunteering-impact-assessment-toolkit

5 The University of Ulster are currently carrying out a longitudinal study with the 50+ age group to investigate the relationship between formal volunteering and health. The first 6 month interim report is due in Autumn 2011.
There is a wealth of evidence of how volunteering promotes understanding between community groups and helps to build community social networks and cohesion. A recent report from a survey of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland reported that although young people from less well off financial backgrounds were less likely to formally volunteer (21%) than young people from well off backgrounds (38%), they were much more likely to say that volunteering had increased their contact with people from different community or religious backgrounds (Irvine and Schubotz, 2010).

**National Quality Standards in Volunteering**

The most wide ranging benefits and long term positive impact from volunteering comes through programmes and groups which have good volunteer management policies and practices in place. Like the National Occupational Standards for Community Development, there are National Occupational Standards for Managing Volunteers which set out the skills that staff and volunteers who manage volunteers in their organisation should have, as well as what they should know and understand, in order to do their job well (Skills-Third Sector, No Date). Also, the ‘Investing in Volunteers’ quality standard in volunteer management offers a framework around which organisations can benchmark their practices and gain recognition for providing volunteer management of a good standard (http://iiv.investinginvolunteers.org.uk/)
4.0 Case studies which showcase the integral role of volunteers within community development

The Community Development process is underpinned by five key values, these are (1) Social Justice, (2) Collective Action, (3) Community Empowerment, (4) Equality and Anti-discrimination and (5) Working and Learning Together (Federation for Community Development Learning, No Date). Volunteering is one of the main ways in which the principles of community development work are realised, as is evidenced through the case studies listed below. Each case study will begin with a short description of the key ‘value’, followed by the background of the volunteer involving organisation / group, what the community need is, how volunteers are involved and what impact involving volunteers is making.

**Key Value: Social Justice**

Community development is about helping groups to achieve change and develop and fulfil long term goals. Part of this is recognising that social justice incorporates environmental, political cultural and economic justice. Promoting human and civil rights and responsibilities are also a key part of re-imaging communities, especially those which have suffered most during the years of civil unrest.

**Case Study: Community Restorative Justice**

**Background**

Community Restorative Justice (CRJ) is based in Newry/Armagh and was established in 2007 following the amalgamation of a number of local CRJ groups. It was accredited by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate in October 2009, and is a registered charity. The main role of CRJ is as an early intervention mediation service. The ideology of the organisations work is one of restorative justice which is not “to punish people but to reduce the incidence of socially harmful activity, to promote victim-offender reconciliation and to help create safer communities”.

**Community Need**

CRJ was established because of recognised need for a community led response to conflict, crime and anti-social behaviour that was happening in the local area. It aims to bring wrong doers, victims and the community together in a safe, non-violent and non-confrontational structured format to collectively repair harm that has been done, reduce offending behaviour and promote good relations.
Volunteer Involvement

At the moment there are 35 volunteers involved in CRJ. The main volunteer role is case worker practitioners; the role largely involves one to one work with clients. This is a very technical role which requires a great deal of skill and knowledge. Volunteer tasks include taking accurate details from disputing parties, referring case to appropriate agencies i.e. social services, drug & alcohol counselling, youth services etc., keeping up to date with community restorative justice principles and practice and keeping accurate case records. CRJ offers accredited training for its volunteers, who in the main are community based representatives, the most recent training was also attended by two local police officers. This enhances the skill base of the volunteers, who are also local people; it builds up their knowledge, increases their confidence and provides them with an understanding of the community and voluntary agencies in their area. This in turn enables them to signpost service users to other supportive services and agencies.

Impact

CRJ encourages communities to avail of all statutory and voluntary agency support; this includes the Confederation of Community Groups, Southern Health and Social Care Trust, Southern Education and Library Board and Volunteer Now. By working in a preventative, reactive and confidential manner CRJ empowers local communities, enabling them to live without fear. This in turn promotes cohesion and understanding and repairs relationships that could otherwise be irreparably damaged. The volunteers themselves gain a sense of achievement, satisfaction and fulfilment and confidence in the knowledge that they are building a better community and future for themselves and their families.

Key Value: Collective Action

Community development work with communities involves organising, influencing and taking action. It also includes promoting active participation of people within communities, using the power of collective voice and of collective action and empowering communities to recognise existing skills, knowledge and expertise.

Case Study: Fuel Poverty Initiative

Background

The Fuel Poverty Initiative is a subgroup of Sallywood and Castle Street Community Association which has been established since 1996. The group is located in the rural town of Irvinestown, Co. Fermanagh. It comprises 136 homes with a mix of N.I.H.E and
private dwellings. It is the 5th most disadvantaged enumeration district in N. Ireland and has suffered a long history of unemployment.

**Community Need**

A subgroup was set up in January this year to take a community development approach to tackle the problem of fuel poverty because of the severe weather conditions and increased fuel poverty within the area.

**Volunteer Involvement**

There are 5 volunteers that sit on the subgroup. Their role includes researching the extent and impact of fuel poverty within the local area, drawing up a strategy to tackle the issue and also attending events to represent the subgroup and raise awareness of the work they are doing. The group has addressed the British Prime Minister and Fermanagh District Council about the issue of Fuel Poverty.

**Impact**

The subgroup aims to establish a social enterprise which will provide local people with a quality service and a range of affordable fuel products, with the reserves are reinvested in developing its services including locally based community initiatives. A clear aim of the group is to encourage participation from the community in a voluntary capacity to support this initiative. The group continues to look to develop relationships between the community association and local residents, encouraging greater participation from the community in developing new initiatives that solve the issue of fuel poverty.

The group hopes to grow its volunteer base to 15 to work alongside paid employees and people currently on government back-to-work schemes to manage the various aspects of the enterprise. Ultimately the sub group believes that the way forward is for the community to invest in the production of growing timber for a multitude of purposes including firewood and wooden pellets. They hope to work with local farmers lease the land and grow trees and produce both environmentally and economically sound products.
Case studies which showcase the integral role of volunteers within community development

Key Value: Community Empowerment

Community development is about supporting communities and organisations to work together. Empowering organisations to consult with and influence decision making that affects their lives.

Case Study: Sandy Row Community Forum

Background

The Sandy Row Community Forum (SRCF), was established in 1996, and acts as an umbrella organisation for all the local community groups, bringing together diverse social partners to benefit the area.

Community Need

Sandy Row is a build up inner city residential area and is considered a staunchly loyalist area of Belfast, which has historically been affiliated with paramilitary groups. Although progress is being made in Sandy Row with the establishment of community based groups, it is still an area recognised as having health, disability, employment and crime related concerns.

Volunteer Involvement

Sandy Row Community Forum runs a number of projects and initiatives that rely on volunteers. The Forum currently has a Management Committee made up of 20 volunteers and volunteer led youth projects including After Schools Club, Homework Club, Summer Schemes and youth holiday clubs. Each of these schemes would also involve up to 20 volunteers. Aside from youth projects the Forum tackles community safety through a volunteer led Neighbourhood Watch Scheme. Volunteers for community projects come from the local community and surrounding area while many volunteers involved in children and youth projects are from Stranmillis College.

Impact

Sandy Row Community Forum has found that their community development is both informed by and reliant on involving volunteers. Glenda Davies, Strategic Development Manager, says that involving volunteers helps to empower local communities by, “...building community capacity and building a legacy for Sandy Row. Volunteers and residents create reliance on their own community rather than outside groups. They deliver services and for themselves and it creates involvement and engagement within the community”

Volunteer led projects within the work of Sandy Row Community Forum have a positive impact on the community and individuals. Parents who are involved in homework clubs
Case studies which showcase the integral role of volunteers within community development

and education support have the opportunity to get to meet each other, create networks and develop support systems as well as friendships.

The Neighbourhood Watch Scheme has empowered the community members to create more positive relationships with the PSNI; this is significant for an area that has historically had to deal with contentious issues. The formation of the volunteer led group increased the confidence of the community to address issues and has given the message to residents that they are not alone in having concerns that they wish to see addressed. Volunteering within Sandy Row Community Forum has helped to foster a culture of cooperation and support within the Sandy Row Community; volunteering binds people together and gives communities strength to address the issues that affect them.

Key Value: Equality and Anti-discrimination

Challenging oppression and promoting diversity is an important aspect of community development. The following case study highlights the important role which volunteers play in supporting others to appreciate social diversity.

Case Study: Community Relations Forum – Hate Crime Card Scheme

Background

The Forum was formed in 1991 within the Newtownabbey Borough, with the aim of promoting good community relations by encouraging honest and open dialogue, enabling people to have a better understanding of and respect for each other’s views and opinions. It works at grass roots level to ensure that all residents of the borough can live together in a safe, pleasant, vibrant and shared community where everyone feels equal and welcome.

Community Need

Following a spate of racial attacks in the Borough, a volunteer with the Forum encouraged the organisation to look at tackling this growing problem. At that point in time Newtownabbey was ranked the 4th highest Borough in Northern Ireland for racism and sectarianism. This need for community support led to the Forum instigating a Hate Crime Card Scheme, supported by Newtownabbey District Policing Partnership. This is a simple business card with contact details for the Forum issued by PSNI to people who are victims of racial or sectarian intimidation.
Volunteer Involvement

Volunteers are a vital part of the success of this scheme, working alongside the PSNI, the Housing Executive, Newtownabbey Community Safety Partnership, local community groups and churches to provide immediate support and encourage people from ethnic minority communities to get involved with the local community activities. The Forum has developed a wide network of contacts within local community groups and churches. For example, volunteers from a local church buddy with those from an ethnic minority community to introduce them with the mothers and toddlers group. This buddying approach is still in the early stages but aims to help new residents settle in and feel welcome. As one volunteer from the Forum stated “We wanted to be able to help families but we didn’t just want to cold call to offer support. Sometimes you don’t know whether to knock on a door or not”.

Impact

The scheme has proved extremely successful over the past three years with more than 20 volunteers having been involved, providing support for up to 200 people from ethnic minority communities. Given that anti-social incidents often happen outside of standard working hours and in rural areas, volunteers are able to complement the paid Forum’s Co-ordinator role by extending the accessibility and availability of the service across the borough. It has been known for volunteers to respond to incidents of intimidation that have taken place over the Christmas period and at evenings and weekends.

The Forum Co-ordinator stated, “We are able to tackle discrimination immediately so that the person is not waiting for weeks to have their issues dealt with. We can use our experience to signpost to other community groups or sometimes it’s as simple as introducing them to a neighbour who can call in to make them feel safe”.

A knock-on of this scheme is that a retired teacher, qualified in Teaching English as a Second Language (TEFL), volunteers her time to work on a one-to-one basis with a Chinese family. Also volunteers from the Indian and Polish communities have been involved in assisting with translation and raising awareness of multi-culturalism. In recognition of this the Hate Crime Card Scheme was awarded runner-up in the Community Involvement Category at the Intercultural Achievement Awards sponsored by OFMDFM and PSNI in June 2010.
Key Value: Working and Learning Together

Case Study: Mencap – LiveNet Project

Background

Mencap supports people with a learning disability, their families and carers. Mencap provides high-quality, flexible services that allow people to live as independently as possible. The LiveNet project is delivered throughout Northern Ireland providing learning opportunities for people with a learning disability, their families, support staff and volunteers.

Community Need

In 1946 Judy Fryd, a mother of a child with a learning disability formed ‘The National Association of Parents of Backward Children’. She enlisted the support of the ‘Nursery World’ magazine to invite other parents to contact her for mutual support and understanding. Many wrote back to Judy expressing their anger and sorrow at the lack of services for their children. This informal grass roots group of parents with children who have a learning disability has grown into what we know today as Mencap.

Volunteer Involvement

Mencap is supported by approximately 15,000 volunteers across the UK with approximately 8,000 supporting local groups. Volunteers are involved in a wide range of roles, including offering care and support to people with a learning disability, helping to run activities in local clubs and groups, general activities such as campaigns, communications, events, and fundraising as well as governance support. In order to make the most of this gift of time, Mencap and LiveNet both have dedicated volunteer strategies, recruitment, training and support programmes.

Impact

With the support of volunteers Mencap is able to help young people and adults live and engage in everyday life, enabling them to enjoy more fulfilling activities and live independently. With this support young people and adults with a learning disability are able to engage in dedicated ICT training and activities which empower them with increased confidence and ability to use digital technology, have fun and improve their health and well being. It has also created a community of individuals from both mainstream and learning disability background who would not usually be in the same social circle. This has had a real and noticeable impact on both groups, which includes enabling friendships to form and mutual understanding to be gained. A good example of how this has been done is through the joint club in Lisnaskea where young people from
the local community have joined the LiveNet club as peer mentors, helping young people to learn together and feel part of the one community. Key topics run as part of the club include e-safety and safe social networking, using ICT, having fun and keeping healthy.
5.0 The current context for community development within volunteering including the policy relevance

Refreshed Volunteer Infrastructure and Strategic Direction
A major part of the volunteering infrastructure has recently been re-shaped into a service fit for the 21st century. This re-configuration was driven by a need to better meet societal / cultural needs and government priorities (Department of Finance and Personnel, 2008). The merger of 10 organisations in 2010 led to the creation of Volunteer Now, an integrated service that brings together the strength of regional and local expertise and experience in volunteer development and support. The first Volunteering Strategy for NI has now also been agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive. This strategy provides a clear direction for the development of volunteering over the next 5-10 years. It also highlights the commitment and importance given to volunteering by the NI Government in supporting and sustaining communities. The Strategy also has a key priority of providing effective infrastructure support to volunteering (Department for Social Development, 2011). The combination of a Government led volunteering strategy and the provision of a strong volunteering infrastructure would add a great deal of value to a new community development framework for NI.

“Volunteering makes all our lives better – it is in all our interests to embed a robust culture of volunteering in Northern Ireland”. “It is essential that we continue to nurture and realise the capacity and capability that exists, making it easier for people to contribute their time and views in creating the kind of society in which they want to live.” (Nelson McCausland, Minister for Social Development, Ministerial Foreward–Volunteering Strategy for NI- 2011)

Volunteering as an activity has a great deal of relevance to many public policy priorities. In the last 2 years, Volunteer Now responded to 53 public policy consultations because of the clear relevance between volunteering and Government Department priorities.

“Almost every aspect of everyday life – the communities we live in, our physical environment, our sport and leisure activities, where we work and worship, our schools and hospitals benefits from volunteers” (Department for Social Development, 2011).

Last year, Volunteer Now produced a comprehensive evidence paper which outlined the strategic links between the outcomes / impact from volunteering and current Government priorities across all twelve government departments as well as local
Case studies which showcase the integral role of volunteers within community development

Government (Volunteer Now, 2010:2). The arguments made within the paper have been widely supported and accepted across Government.

Economic Environment

The proposed community development framework is being developed at a time of significant change across the Community and Voluntary Sector, as well as the Private and Public Sectors. The world economic crisis, public funding cuts and public policy reforms to the health and social care, welfare and pensions systems will have an impact in NI. The extent and scope of the impact is still unclear, however, analysts predict that the most vulnerable groups and communities, who have the greatest reliance on public services are in danger of being most severely affected. As the public sector reduces in size, the Community and Voluntary Sector will also experience cuts in government funding, however, it is argued that the sector may also be pressured to fill the gaps in services and support no longer being provided by the State. Last year the Community Foundation for NI commissioned research to measure the impact of the economic downturn on the community sector. Many of the community development organisations surveyed were small in size, relying solely or mainly on volunteers (Harrison and Morrissey, 2010).

Although the full impact of recessionary times is yet to be felt in NI, small pieces of ongoing research has shown a mixed picture in terms of the impact on volunteering patterns. It is forecast that some organisation will be involving a greater number of volunteers with a smaller budget. In some cases volunteers may be asked to do much more challenging roles within organisations which are trying to meet the needs of vulnerable groups and disadvantaged societies. Experts in the field suggest that local people should be given the option of being involved in more ‘complex tasks’ and therefore rooting them as central actors in neighbourhood renewal work (Geoghegan & Powell, 2011). Other organisations may decide to freeze volunteer recruitment due to a lack of resources to manage them. Due to the complex nature of volunteering activity and the changing landscape within which it happens, the need for a strong, infrastructure to maximise capacity whilst maintaining high standards is pivotal to providing much needed community development work.

Volunteers: Supply and Demand

Research evidence is showing that volunteering is at a ‘cross roads’ in NI, with ‘formal’ volunteer numbers at best static since 1995 (282,000, 21% of population) whilst informal volunteering have fallen substantially from 600,000 in 1995 to 470,111 in 2007 (35% of population) (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007). This finding challenges the preconception that people will volunteer, ‘no matter what’. Lack of time and competing commitments are the main barriers to people starting or staying with volunteering. In our
Case studies which showcase the integral role of volunteers within community development

time poor culture, people generally are expecting roles which are interesting, meaningful and which have flexibility in when they get involved. There is also an issue of supply and demand, 60% of voluntary and community sector organisations surveyed, in ‘It’s All About Time’, said that volunteers are becoming harder to recruit, yet 77% said that they couldn’t operate without them (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007).

Bringing Volunteering to Under-represented Groups / Disadvantaged Communities

There is a need to encourage under-represented groups to volunteer, generally volunteers tend to be mainly white, middle aged and from higher socio-economic groups. A drive to increase both formal and informal volunteering in all communities, particularly those in which volunteering is less prevalent and which are also more likely to be disadvantaged is important. Volunteers are already involved in activities within Neighbourhood Renewal Areas which have been identified as the most disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland. A report within the Enniskillen Neighbourhood Renewal Area suggested that volunteering activity was lower (13.5%) than across the general population (21%). Interestingly, although people tend to be less likely to volunteer in these areas, there is evidence that people from lower socio-economic groups can benefit more from being involved in volunteering than those from more wealthy backgrounds (Volunteer Development Agency, 2007). It is a very good way of building ‘social capital’ within and between communities. Furthermore, it is clear that communities within which community development work is most needed, may require the most support in terms of getting ‘buy in’, contributing local knowledge and actively engaging in work alongside professionals. These were key challenges faced by the New Deal for Communities programme in England (Lawless, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to show how volunteering has and must continue to be a fundamental part of effective community development work. Four case studies from volunteer involving organisations have demonstrated the contribution being made towards the four principle values of the NOS Community Development process i.e. Social Justice, Collective Action, Community Empowerment, Equality and Anti-discrimination and Working and Learning Together. They have also showed organisations that clearly recognise that they could not offer services to the extent that they do without the gift of time, knowledge and skills offered by volunteers. This paper has shown that there is a lot that the volunteering infrastructure can offer to any proposed community development framework. There is a wealth of good practice knowledge and experience which can support groups who are aiming to engage local people in meaningful ways through community development programmes. This includes
guidance on how local people can be attracted, trained, properly managed and retained. Furthermore, it can also offer guidance in how complementary relationships between paid workers and volunteers can be formed.

There are many communities in Northern Ireland which can benefit from community development work which includes volunteers who are willing to offer their help. It is important that time is given to considering and clarifying the relationship between community development and volunteering. Volunteer Now, along with the case study contributors are pleased to be able to offer our input into this discussion.
6.0 References


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