

# **More than a numbers game: a UK perspective on youth volunteering and active citizenship**

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## **"Everybody can be great because anybody can serve." Martin Luther King Jr**

There is a growing interest across Europe in the possibilities of public policy intervention in youth volunteering. In the UK, the government wants to promote youth volunteering and to stimulate civil renewal. The Home Secretary (2003) has argued that: "civil renewal must form the centrepiece of the government's reform agenda in the coming years". Both he and the Chancellor regularly link a civil renewal agenda with engaging young people in voluntary activity. For example, in 2004 the Chancellor said: "the advantages [of volunteering] for young people are clear, [it helps people] to...become more active citizens". A Commission has also been set up by leading politicians to develop a national framework of volunteering for young people and "to examine...whether we can, through making it a national priority, engage a new generation of young people in serving their communities" (Brown 2004).

The aim of this paper is to examine this supposed relationship between youth volunteering and active citizenship and to suggest how effective and progressive public policy on youth volunteering might be developed with a focus on the UK. Firstly, I outline what I mean by active citizenship and civil renewal, and suggest civil renewal could be a strong motivating idea to guide the future development of youth volunteering. I then consider some examples of volunteering programmes and their links with civil renewal which reveals a paucity of evidence on their impact. Finally, I consider the implications of this analysis for research and for public policy.

### ***1. Active citizenship and civil renewal***

In this field, language frequently serves to obstruct rather than facilitate understanding. Civil renewal, civic service, active citizenship, even volunteering, are all expressions fraught with difficulty. Civil renewal, for example, is a complex term invoked to cover a range of events and experiences. If we could describe what it means, we may be able to achieve it. The UK Home Secretary (2003b) uses it interchangeably with active citizenship to describe government actions which enable people to act themselves, he says:

Civil renewal is about educating, empowering and supporting citizens to be active in their communities, socially and politically...Civil renewal and active citizenship is about creating the conditions for people to take control of their own lives, with the state acting as enabler, a supporter and a facilitator

It is, however, outside the scope of this paper to fully interrogate the concept of civil renewal. Instead I follow Nash (2002) and take the concept of civil renewal to be an articulation of achieving civic engagement, where civic engagement means participation by citizens in the public realm. Civic engagement, as it is generally understood, comprises at least three forms of engagement. These are: informal social engagement with family, friends, neighbours and colleagues; participation in voluntary and community organisations, including self-help groups, charities, sports teams, clubs and churches; and participation in governing and running of public bodies and government services. This paper looks at the role youth volunteering action might play in promoting all these types of lasting civic engagement.

It is desirable to bring about increased levels of civic engagement. Civic engagement benefits both those who get engaged and the community as a whole. Robert Putnam (2000) and others have shown that people who are socially and politically active are healthier, happier and more prosperous; they find it easier to find a job and have a larger pool of friends and acquaintances to call on when things go wrong. At the same time, active communities are also safer, more attractive communities, able to pull in public services, and fight for their needs and advance their interests in other ways.

It is also important to note that levels of civic engagement are reported to be lower amongst more disadvantaged groups. For example, poor people report being much more interested in social issues than their middle class counterparts but less empowered to change things. While only 35 per cent of middle class people believe that they can influence local affairs, the figure falls to 20 per cent for the least well off (Strategy Unit). This potentially means that the more disadvantaged in society have potentially most to gain from opportunities for genuine civic engagement.

I use 'youth action' and 'voluntary activity' as umbrella terms to describe all kinds of voluntary engagement characterised by being open to all, unpaid, undertaken of a person's own free will, educational (in sense of providing non-formal learning) and of social value<sup>1</sup>. Whilst there is recognition of the link between youth action policy and civic engagement within the UK government, often youth action is presented as an intrinsic good, something that should be promoted for its own sake. This is what leads to targets focused simply on increasing the numbers of volunteers or the number of hours they spend volunteering. Youth action can indeed deliver benefits to both the participant and the beneficiary of the action and this may be a reason for public policy intervention specifically to increase the level of youth action.

I would argue, however, that public policy should be both more focused and more ambitious in what it seeks to achieve by promoting youth action rather than simply seeking to increase the numbers of volunteers. This is because youth action has the potential to generate lifelong habits of civic engagement by virtue of its basic characteristics. Effective public policy needs a motivating idea. That is, it is important to be clear what objective we want public policy interventions to achieve. The objective of promoting lasting habits of civic engagement is a desirable objective for public policy and can justify interventions to promote youth action.

Of course, promoting civic engagement is just one of a number of possible motivating ideas for public policy intervention to boost youth action. Other valid objectives might be enhancing life chances or improving public services. Clearly, though, there is a need to prioritise and promoting civic engagement and achieving the goal of civil renewal is a strong contender for the priority objective. This is partly because youth action has already been shown to have potential for success to deliver in this area. And it is partly because although increased levels of civic engagement are clearly desirable, there are very few public policy levers available to bring this about, so we have to maximise the use of those that do appear to be promising.

So, there is a common sense link between youth action and civil renewal, and public policy should make civil renewal an explicit objective of interventions to enhance youth action. The challenge now is to understand how youth action might best maximise its impact on civil renewal objectives by assessing the evidence to date.

## **2. Current policy and practice in the UK**

I will now sketch out what we know about the links between youth action and civil renewal based on evidence from some of the most prominent and better evaluated forms of youth action in the UK. I will then highlight some similar issues with the evidence from Europe and the United States.

One of the strongest trends in UK youth action in recent years is the rise of youth advocacy and projects led by young people. This trend has emerged from a growing appreciation that young people have a right to be listened to and taken seriously and to shape their own activities. A longitudinal study (Roker and Eden 2003) of 22 youth action groups found evidence of the ability of such programmes to influence levels of civic engagement and sense of civic responsibility. It found that as a result of their participation young people felt they could try and bring about change in society and their participation had impacted on their sense of who they are and their understanding of political and social issues. Interestingly though many young people felt significant change could be achieved locally but they felt national change would be much harder to achieve. The researchers suggested that it might therefore be valuable to focus on the possibilities of local change. A second important finding was that most young people did not see the activities they were involved in as 'political' and viewed the world of party politics very negatively. Nonetheless, they did feel young people should exercise their vote.

Another strong trend is the rise in the numbers of people taking 'gap years'. In 2002, 160,000 people in the UK took gap years. Most gap years involve spending time away from home and have an average cost of almost 4,000 euro. They can include formal and informal forms of voluntary action but do not necessarily include any and many gap years are primarily about leisure. There is much to be gained from overseas travel. However, it has been

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<sup>1</sup> Following the definitions adopted by the Council of Europe and European Commission.

argued (Simpson PhD thesis forthcoming 2004) that gap years tend simply to reinforce traveller's expectations of a place and fail to take proper account of the interests of the host community.

The UK government has mainly focussed its own efforts on the creation of two programmes: Millennium Volunteers and Young Volunteer Challenge. Millennium Volunteers (MV) is an award scheme established in 2000 for young people aged 16 to 24. The programme was designed to promote a commitment to 200 hours of voluntary action within one year. An award of excellence is given to those completing a 200-hour placement which is delivered through non-profit organisations or a self-designed project. Recognition is also given for service of 100 hours. By 2004 130,000 young people had joined MV.

The evaluation (Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) 2002) of MV found it had been largely successful in delivering experiences that reflected what young people wanted and that delivered benefits to both volunteers and the communities in which they volunteered. The evaluation found that 84 per cent of volunteers agreed MV had increased their confidence and 65 per cent believed MV had increased their employability. Crucially for engendering civic engagement, 80 per cent reported that they were more aware of the needs of others and 68 per cent agreed that they had become more committed to volunteering, owing to their involvement in MV.

MV aims to be inclusive of everyone but particularly those with no previous experience of volunteering and those vulnerable to social exclusion and has had some success here. It attracted people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and was very successful in attracting young people who were unemployed and nearly half had no previous experience of volunteering. However, it was suggested that the one-year timescale is insufficiently flexible to allow people to fit their hours around other commitments. This lack of flexibility may have a disproportionate effect on groups from 'marginalized communities' and students. Another evaluation suggested that the drive to meet scheme targets means that harder-to-reach groups who are less likely to become volunteers, or who may need greater support to volunteer, are neglected (Volunteer Development England and Youth Action Network 2003).

The distortions that are created by the focus on numerical targets making the programme less attractive to some groups must be tackled if we want youth action to become the norm for the broadest possible range of young people.

MV provides a good basis for the future development of youth action programmes and suggests the potential of youth action programmes to generate lasting civic engagement although longitudinal research is needed to fully understand the extent of this.

One key issue that must be tackled at this stage in the life of MV is the distortions that are created by the focus on numerical targets making the programme less attractive to some groups. Similarly, the focus on targets does not easily take into account the time and financial resources that may be required to involve young people from harder-to-reach groups. If we want youth action to become the norm for young people, we need to acknowledge these barriers and take them seriously in order that participation is as wide as possible.

Young Volunteer Challenge (YVC) is another government-designed and funded pilot programme offering opportunities for 18- and 19-year olds from low-income backgrounds to undertake voluntary work on community projects in nine areas. The programme aims to test the effect of financial incentives on young people's participation in youth action. Young people who have received particular means-tested benefits an Education Maintenance Allowance or were eligible for Income Support whilst undertaking vocational training are eligible to participate. YVC is a full-time experience, which lasts up to nine months. Participants receive a weekly allowance of approximately 60 euro a week and a lump sum end of experience award of almost 1000 euro.

On-going monitoring evidence indicates that the weekly stipend is proving a greater incentive and facilitator of participation in this programme than the lump sum payment at the end. Evidence from AmeriCorps in the US concurs in suggesting that the lump sum end-of-service payment does not incentivise people to stay in the programme if they don't think it's worthwhile. The project has experienced difficulties in attracting young people to participate (partly due to the affect of the stipend on benefit entitlement) and to stay engaged with the programme. It is hoped that the full evaluation of YVC will provide insights on the best way to develop youth action targeted at disadvantaged groups. Many other programmes exist but have strikingly weak evidence of their impact of civil renewal goals.

The AmeriCorps programme in the US is also important to mention briefly here as it is often held up, not least by the UK Chancellor, as the gold standard for what we should be striving to achieve in the UK. AmeriCorps gives financial assistance to nearly 75 000 school leavers each year for service with 2100 non-profit and faith-based organisations and public agencies. The programme provides accommodation, a weekly stipend and an educational award in exchange for a year of full-time service in activities such as youth mentoring, running after school programmes and cleaning up parks. The goals of AmeriCorps include renewing “the ethic of civic responsibility”.

A study of AmeriCorps participants indicated that, after their period of service, volunteers were significantly more likely to become involved in local community groups or to attend public meetings. A change in volunteers’ expressed personal and social values was also identified. The programme has been found both to increase individual opportunity and to serve community needs (Simon and Wang 2000). Members who were part of programmes with clearly visible results were found to be most positively affected in terms of a sense of on-going civic responsibility (Aguire International 2001). Whilst these findings are encouraging, the methodologies used to conduct evaluations of AmeriCorps has been insufficiently robust to place too much store by them, for example, no efforts have been made to establish the counter-factual (such as a control group).

These examples have also shown that whilst the connections are sometimes made between youth action programmes and lasting civic engagement and there is some evidence to support this intuitive link, the empirical evidence to demonstrate this link is grossly under-developed. The significant limitations of this evidence warn us that we cannot simply assume that voluntary action programmes will deliver lasting civic engagement. This means that we need to develop a policy framework explicitly prioritises its achievement.

These examples show that a host of different policy objectives lie behind different programmes, although in some cases these objectives are not clearly articulated. It is essential to have a clear understanding of the different goals that programmes would pursue. Once the goals are established, the best structures for the achievement of those goals can be identified. Too often thinking in this area is not rigorous enough; as Lind (2003) has said, ‘service’ is often ‘a solution without a problem’. Only if we have a firm grasp of our goals and the models that might best meet these goals, can we have an informed discussion about the options available to us. Any one programme may aim to achieve one or more objective. These objectives could be grouped together according to whether they aim to achieve personal, community or instrumental objectives.

Personal objectives often focus on enhancing the life chances of the individual undertaking the action and promoting equality of opportunity. The objectives may include building character and a sense of identity, providing experience of work, broadening horizons, building networks, easing transitions to adulthood or enhancing skills and experience. It is crucial that personal benefits are delivered to ensure people sign up to programmes. These benefits will also make it more likely that people will develop an on-going habit of civic engagement and in the process help to achieve the government’s objective as well.

Community objectives come the closest to a direct focus on civil renewal. These might include encouraging the practice of volunteering as a form of civic engagement, promoting international understanding, building local or national identity, developing skills, knowledge and values for active citizenship or giving young people the opportunity to exercise choice and make decisions.

Instrumental objectives focus on the delivery of practical change. For example, through the provision of volunteers to enhance the capacity of the voluntary sector or in the public sector, improving the condition of those who are helped by volunteers or improving the quality and efficiency of public services through the use of volunteers. These objectives can deliver personal and community benefits at the same time although these will not be the primary drivers.

It should be clear that whilst there may be overlap between these sets of objectives, not all practices and programmes promote all these ends, or at least not to the same degree. So a programme like Young Volunteer Challenge does little to build shared identities. Some argue that compulsory national service does not do much to encourage volunteering. Domestic programmes do not do much to help international understanding.

I have suggested that youth action should be designed to deliver lasting civic engagement but found scant evidence that current practice - whilst showing considerable potential - is delivering on this objective. I will now turn to look at what public policy can do to help meet this challenge.

### **3. Implications for research and public policy**

Six key policy questions which must be addressed if youth action policy is going to match up to the challenge of delivering lasting civic engagement and reflect the need to shift thinking away from simple numbers and towards different types of experiences and groups. These questions relate to image and language, what young people want, targets, building on existing programmes, who to engage, and delivery.

#### **1. Image and language**

It has been argued that the concept and term ‘volunteering’ have acted as obstacles to progressive policy development which seeks to bring about civil renewal (Nash 2002). This is partly because they are regarded by some as representing control of the volunteer over others through a one-way process (Brav et al 2002). This notion is supported by the fact that in the UK those who participate in volunteer programmes tend to be more highly educated and have a higher income than average, with those from the highest socio-economic groups almost twice as likely to take part in a formal voluntary activity as those from the lowest (IVR 1997).

It is also partly put down to evidence that the term ‘volunteering’ causes some groups to disassociate themselves from voluntary activities which they might otherwise engage in. For example, Little (cited in Kearney 2003) suggests: “the v-word...with its inevitable blue-rinse connotations of middle-aged, middle class women helping those less fortunate, alienat[es] young people and ethnic minorities”.

This notion was supported by Gaskin (1998) reporting a survey in which two-thirds of young people interviewed said ‘volunteering’ was not something people in their age group would do. Amongst other barriers to their participation peer pressure was cited and two-thirds of those interviewed said volunteering would be ‘uncool’. To address this image problem programmes need a brand that young people can identify with and aspire to, this makes their involvement in brand design and development essential.

If we want to make the widest possible range of opportunities available to the widest range of young people,; we need to employ a concept which is sufficiently loosely defined and is not off putting to young people.

#### **2. What young people want**

Whilst the evidence suggests that young people don’t like the term ‘volunteering’, it also shows that many young people do believe in the value of voluntary work for both society and themselves, and in one survey 94 per cent said they saw volunteering as a great way to gain experience (Gaskin 1998). Young people believe that youth action should be based on the principle of something for something.

Gaskin (1998) has identified a number of characteristics that young people are looking for from voluntary opportunities:

- Flexibility - in working time, choice and spontaneity
- Legitimacy - to combat peer pressure and negative associations
- Ease of access - more information on where, how and when
- Experience – stimulating opportunities and skills development
- Incentives - tangible outcomes, references, certificates of achievement
- Variety - types of opportunities available
- Organisation - efficient but informal

- Laughs - to incentivise continuing the activity

As well as meeting young people's requirements, we also need to take account of the fact that some forms of voluntary activity are likely to do very little toward making a lasting influence on people's civic engagement, while others might be more likely to make people think about the politics of their world or immediate community. But it is important to note that there is no obvious contradiction between what young people want and the civil renewal agenda. However, there are indications that what young people want may not match the kind of programmes which would deliver other goals such as increasing their employability, for example. This makes it all the more compelling that we consult young people in the development of all plans for youth action programmes.

However, at present we do not have a sufficient level of empirical evidence on which forms of voluntary action are most likely to lead to on-going civic involvement. We also need to know if this civic involvement, or the voluntary action itself, boosts the life chances of those doing it through the personal benefits gained. So, in the short term, we should focus on the quality of voluntary opportunities as an aid to promoting further and continuing civic engagement as well as encouraging more people to engage. In the long term, government needs to contribute to building the evidence base on the civic impact of certain forms of volunteering. Once we have established a decent evidence base, more ambitious programmes can be developed.

### **3. Building on existing programmes**

Given the knowledge, skills and experience embedded in existing youth action programmes, it is crucial to ensure that all future developments build on existing programmes. This means improving our ability to measure the impact of programmes on their increasingly sophisticated objectives. It will be important for policy makers to emphasise that the aim is to target scarce resources where they can have the greatest impact in terms of civil renewal.

### **4. Who to engage**

The objectives that a youth action programme is seeking to achieve are crucial to decisions about who the programme seeks to engage. Given that the most disadvantaged groups tend to be the least civically engaged (Fahmy 2003) and that participation can deliver personal benefits as well as greater civic engagement (IVR 2002), there is clear merit in targeting opportunities towards disadvantaged young people. Furthermore, experience tells us that programmes that do not specifically target disadvantaged groups tend to be unsuccessful in attracting them.

If we are going to successfully engage young people from disadvantaged groups, it is crucial to think about the cost of participation to young people. People often talk about payments for youth action as rewards. However, many young people will only be able to participate in a programme if they receive some form of financial payment (the Young Volunteer Challenge pilot recognised this although it has run into barriers with the interaction of payments and the benefit system). Payments can be as much about facilitating access to a programme, as they are about rewarding participation. As the evidence from Millennium Volunteers shows, it is also important to take into account the additional resources that can be required by delivery organisations to attract and retain participants from more socially excluded and marginalized groups.

There is a need to target those young people who are least likely to engage in civil society but targeted programmes run the risk of becoming stigmatised as for 'poor people' (Open Agenda 2003). Clearly, this is undesirable in a programme designed to promote civic engagement. This is why it might be wiser to develop universally accessible programmes which take particular measures to ensure that people from a diverse range of background can participate. There may be additional advantages to such programmes. For example, programmes that bring people from different socio-economic classes together may help to build social networks across, as well as within, social groups.

## **5. Targets: outputs or outcomes**

The UK government set a target of increasing the number of people volunteering by one million by 2004. The target reflects the current policy focus on numbers of volunteers. I have been arguing that the question to start with is not do we have enough numbers of volunteers, rather it is why do we want to people to engage in youth action? Once we have our big idea - and we have argued it might be achieving civil renewal - we can then move on to the how we do it and how to measure if we have done it.

There is a role for targets. It is well known that what gets done is what gets measured and numbers are important. However, poor quality youth action experiences could be counter-productive. There is some evidence to suggest that those young people who volunteer are often dissatisfied with their experience. In one IVR survey (1997), seven out of ten of all volunteers reported dissatisfaction with the way their voluntary work was organised, with younger volunteers most likely to be critical of their experiences.

This suggests targets need to be about more than sheer numbers of programme participants. Targets for the number of volunteers (i.e. outputs) might be supplemented by measures of change in quality of life or community impact, such as trust, young people's political involvement, youth crime or safety on streets (i.e. outcomes, see Ellis 2000). The Home Office target to increase community participation by 5 per cent by 2006 is a step toward this. To assess success by these measures would mean building-in the ability to address these issues in the design of programmes (Open Agenda 2002). It is not easy to develop measures assess community impact or quality of life, but it is necessary.

## **6. Delivery**

A national policy framework is needed to provide the strategic direction for the development of youth action. The necessary impetus could be delivered through existing bodies and partnership working. The first task is to identify the systemic barriers to youth action and propose remedies. For example, barriers exist in the tax and benefit system and barriers – sometimes put up by professionals - exist to developing opportunities for youth action within public services. There is also a continuing need for a clear legal framework around the status of voluntary action and different forms of payment. This removal of barriers will demand effective cross-departmental co-operation in government.

The second task is to identify funding sources for youth action programmes and manage that financial support. The role of private sector in funding youth action also deserves full exploration and it may be possible to work in partnership with businesses that could either provide financing or donate goods in kind. There may be lessons to be learnt here from the American scheme, Business Strengthening America, which aims to use the business community as “a booster rocket” to efforts by government and voluntary and community organisations to inspire Americans to serve in their communities.

The third task is to identify infrastructure development and support needs in the Voluntary and Community Sector. The key will be to improve the coverage, quality and sustainability of its infrastructure to enable the transferability of practice, including that which effectively links youth action and civil renewal objectives. It is also necessary to set out the common elements of youth action programmes. For example, setting standards in relation to monitoring and outcome-based evaluation and training. There is also a need for a systematic review of all evidence available on the relationship between voluntary action and on-going civic engagement.

The fourth task is to identify gaps in current provision and suggest programmes that might fill them. This would include the development and funding of pilot programmes designed to deliver civic engagement through youth action. However, the decisions about how youth action should be delivered on the ground should be down to local partnerships to ensure community ownership and young people's input into programmes.



## 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that there is a need for a more focussed and ambitious approach to public policy intervention in youth action programmes. Such an approach must begin with clarity about the purpose of youth action. We have argued that the motivating idea behind public policy intervention in youth action could be the achievement of civil renewal. In particular, we recommend the focus be placed on bringing about long lasting habits of civic engagement, including amongst the most disadvantaged young people.

There is, however, a lack of robust evidence to show exactly how youth action should be developed in the future and this evidence base clearly needs to be built. What we do know is that there is significant potential for youth action to bring about lasting habits of civic engagement and the time has come to get a better understanding of how we might exploit this potential.

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