

## WHAT DO THE STUDENTS THINK ABOUT VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTEERING?

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**Abstract:** *The reminiscences of the communist period make their presence being felt even 20 years later after the revolution, in many areas of the social, economic and political life in Romania as in the volunteering context. The field researches certify the fact that in the communist countries, the number of volunteers is much lower than in countries with a long history of capitalism, for which the non-governmental organizations, particularly, seek to promote volunteerism, especially, among youngsters, because they are considered the most willing to offer others of their time and experience. Starting from this last idea I made an exploratory study among students from Social Work specialization, students that represent the subjects of the present article. What means the volunteering for students? What is the volunteering profile in their vision? Are there any costs and/or benefits of this type of activity and if so which ones? These are the key questions that will find their answers in the content of the article.*

**Keywords:** *volunteering, volunteer's profile, costs-benefits.*

### 1. CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATION

According to the French-Romanian Dictionary (1967 p. 339) the word „volunteer” has its origins in the French adjective „volontaire” which means voluntary, willful and by extension of meaning it becomes the noun, masculine „voluntarily” (in army) [1]. In the „Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language” (1998) we find two definitions of the noun „volunteer”. In the first of these, the word retains the meaning in French, noted above, while the second definition is less specific regarding the domain or the type of action, referring to a „person who makes a service willingly and selflessly” [2]. Once with the macro-social awareness of certain issues of public interest, which directly or indirectly affects the living conditions, the level of civilization, it has imposed the concept of *volunteering* that means any type of involvement in a matter of public interest, without requiring a fee.

To become operational the term „volunteering” represents the subject of law no. 339/2006, amending and supplementing

the volunteering Law No. 195/2001. According to this, the volunteering is „the public work carried out on its own initiative by any person in the benefit of others, without receiving a material consideration”. In the art. 2, b) the law specifies the areas where activities can take place in the public interest. These are: „the assistance and the social services, the protection of human rights, healthcare, cultural, artistic, religious, educational, scientific, humanitarian, philanthropic, sporting, environmental, social and community, and many others similar” [3].

### 2. ASPECTS REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERING

In any modern society have the social policies have as an ending the social welfare redistribution. Along with the social policies, the voluntary exercised in non-governmental organizations, which belongs to the civil society represents a complementary means of redistributing the welfare. It should be noted that between the two types of activities (voluntary and circumscribed social policies)

are interrelated despite the fact that they are distinct in structure and mode of settlement.

Thus, NGOs can take in consideration the achieving of the set targets for the social policies or they can work together in achieving the same goals. In this way, it is achieved a mix state / civil society which increases the effectiveness of activities in social services [4]. In the next lines I will examine the role of volunteering focusing on social and economic benefits of this type of activity.

By participating in activities and programs, in the social field, volunteers have the possibility to learn the problems with whom people are facing with in their community, they have the opportunity to contribute directly to resolve or improve these problems. Volunteering promotes social cohesion and solidarity. Those who carry on volunteer activities have the opportunity to develop new relationships between people, to meet people who claim the same interests and, why not, they have the opportunity to know themselves better. But this type of activities does not bring only benefits for the volunteer but also for the beneficiaries and the organizations who provide social services. And I will explain immediately why. The number of staff of NGOs increases not only quantitatively with the involvement of volunteers but also qualitatively, there are big chances that the tasks that have to be completed by an employee or by a volunteer to be fewer and more specific. Beneficiaries may be given in this way, more time and attention.

According to certain studies conducted abroad (project Johns Hopkins Center for the comparative study of the nonprofit sector, 1999 and „The Canadian Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector in Comparative Perspectives”, 2005), the volunteering is a „significant economic force” [5]. In Canada, for example, voluntary work in 2005 brought, according to the estimations, a contribution of nearly \$ 14 billion, representing 1.4% of GDP. Romania data, unfortunately, are not as current or as encouraging. So, from the estimated 5.6 million volunteers for 1996, it was 2.7 a year later. The hours of work supporting various causes have dropped from over 1 billion to about 255 million. Accordingly, the financial

value of this work came in 1997 to 0.35% of GDP from 1.7 as was the previous year [6].

### 3. THE EXPLORATORY STUDY

This article is the output of a research made by me two years ago among students from Social Work specialization within the University of “Transilvania” Brasov. The subject of volunteering was and it still is a peculiar professional interest because social work is a vocational occupation, defined by the social and individual sense of responsibility, by the empathic capacity and helping sense and I personally consider that one of the university specialist’s role from this specialization is to stimulate students to involve themselves in volunteering activities; within the framework of these activities students may enhance the value of their intellectual, aesthetical and spiritual potential and in the same time they may complete their practical experience obtained within the practice period (which I, personally, consider to be insufficient).

Moreover, a future social worker should experience before employment, the work with different categories of users in order to discover not only the specific problems with whom each group is facing but also the place where he finds himself well, philosophically speaking. In addition, the personal professional experience, showed me that those students who were involved in volunteering were more likely to be employed after graduating the studies.

These latter considerations formed the basis for the study undertaken by me, which I wanted to know what students from social work specialization think about volunteering.

The exploratory study targeted especially the students (mostly female) which I coordinated during their professional practice, 54 of them, from the years II, III and IV of the study. The data collecting method consisted in a semi-structured interview and regarded the following themes: the definition of “volunteering”, portraying the profile of the social volunteer, the identification of the advantages and disadvantages, in terms of costs and benefits, that volunteering can have.

In the following lines I will summarize the answers offered by students on each issue separately.

### 3.1. Defining the volunteering activity.

The definitions given by the interviewed students are part of a diverse range of both quantitatively and qualitatively. Thus we have persons who consider that volunteering can be summarized to something made “willingly and not forced by anyone” or “unconditional support”. Moreover, all the interviewed students considered that volunteering is a “gratuitous” activity, “an act of charity”, for which you don’t expect a reward, a material or financial payment. Although none of these are wrong, volunteering can be summarized only through these characteristics because it could be confused with mercy (giving a loaf of bread to a bagger) or with altruism (helping an elderly person to cross the street or carrying the shopping bags). According to the law no.195/2001 volunteering is “the activity of public interest developed unurged by any natural person, for the benefit of others, without receiving a material consideration” [3].

Much more complete definitions were given by students who were volunteers in at least one public or private organization, who succeeded to capture the fact that volunteering is an activity organized and developed in an institution: *„Volunteering is an activity run by a person in an organization, without receiving financial or material rewards; an activity developed in order to support or to help a person or a vulnerable group”*.

Regarding the goal of volunteering activities, this doesn’t appear explicitly in all definitions, but where it was mentioned, the answers can be divided in two categories:

1. those which regard the beneficiaries: *„helping the under-privileged persons”, „activity run for the sake of the community”, „to help those who need it”*
2. those which regard the volunteer: *„aiming to gain new knowledge, developing abilities already gained or build up through experience”, „aiming to offer personal satisfaction”*. When the volunteer is self centered and not centered on the other, the person who needs help, the following question

arises: can we still talk about selfless and voluntary involvement? It seems that as long as the personal interest is followed (no matter its nature) and not the one of those we help.

### 3.2. The volunteer profile in the social field.

If I compiled all the volunteer attributes I would say that this is “the Good Samaritan” never interested in itself, just interested in the good of others, difficult a person which is difficult to be identified in our social reality. But if we analyze each feature of the volunteer in the social field, as it is perceived by students from social work, we find out that the volunteer has no supernatural qualities at all. What distinguishes them from other volunteers is the fact that the first of them can simultaneously hold a series of social and moral characteristics.

Without claiming to establish the exact percentage of these traits in the whole „portrait” of the volunteer, I will try to emphasize the most common answers given by my respondents, the students. In their opinion, people empathy and willingness to help others are the most important elements that characterize the volunteer from social field. Also, the answers show that a volunteer should have certain psychological traits such as patience, willingness to learn, motivation (and here, students have referred to intrinsic motivation) and the will. In this regard, studies in the psycho-sociology field attest the existence of the altruistic personality, which explains why some people are more often involved in offering help to others [7].

Although, there are found in a smaller proportion, certain items that are related to the value field are not missing from the volunteer portrait. So, the volunteer in the social field „must” be a person with a sense of responsibility, selfless, honest and capable of sacrifice for others.

Interesting to note is that some respondents, probably led by the phrase „time is money”, consider that leisure time is an important resource that should be possessed by the volunteer. However, for other students, team spirit, objectivity, self-knowledge and creativity are the characteristics which a volunteer should have or which we can find in a person who is engaged in the social field.

**3.3. Advantages / disadvantages of volunteering.** Students' responses focused on two aspects: one of them was regarding the advantages / disadvantages of volunteering for the person performing such work and the other one was regarding advantages / disadvantages of volunteering for public or private institution in which the volunteer operates. In an overall analysis of the responses, I noticed that, at least in quantitative terms, the list of benefits identified by students is more „generous” than the disadvantages, fact which proves, to some extent, that students have a „positive” image on volunteering, although they are or they are not currently involved in such activity.

Students consider that a volunteer may have many benefits but the first three (in frequency) are: experience, new contacts and the joy of helping others. Also it must not be neglected the personal development, communication relationships, self esteem, job employment opportunity, information regarding the problems of others and personal responsibility.

If the answers regarding the benefits, which a volunteer may have, were extremely varied, the things simplify when we talk about the benefits that volunteering can bring to public and private institutions. In this case, the volunteer may be a human resource for the certain institution, which gives help to beneficiaries without remuneration and ultimately he may contribute to more efficiency in providing the services.

Regarding the disadvantages, volunteers may face one or more of the following situations: for the smooth operation of the activity they need to use personal financial resources (eg. transport), they must give up to some of their spare time and finally they can be ignored or insufficiently appreciated by the institution staff, situation that can be felt by the volunteer as a failure or as a disappointment. Also, at institutional level, disadvantages are present. So, working with volunteers organizations assume the risk of an unsafe collaboration over time (you do not know if the volunteer will come next week too) and a fluctuation among the latest (a group of volunteers spent 2-3 months, and another one is to come) fact which involves

new costs for the organization. Also, students consider that a disadvantage of the volunteering which is experienced by the institutions is the lack of experience in the field where the volunteer operates.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The data of this study could come, primarily, in supporting the nongovernmental organizations that want to attract as many young people as possible in volunteering. These can build viable strategies for attracting and keeping volunteers or they may improve the existing ones therefore youngsters, despite the fact that they do not gain material or financial benefits, they want to participate in such activities.

Synthesizing the data from this study, I can affirm that although we stand on a maiden stage for volunteering in Romania, things can be improved through the combined efforts of three actors: individual - who may be involved in volunteer activities as far as he has the right skills and spare time, public and private institutions - by building strategies for attracting and keeping volunteers, and finally, the state - by creating a clear and consistent legislation in order to motivate people to get involved.

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