Our Common Commons:
The Role of Volunteer Centers and Community Foundations in Sustaining Volunteer Energy

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In a recent article Brudney and Meijs (2009) propose that volunteering can be likened to a natural resource and analyzed from this perspective. They developed a new approach for understanding volunteerism that shows that volunteer energy can be compared to a human-made, renewable resource that can be grown and recycled, and whose continuation and volume of flow can be influenced by human beings positively as well as negatively. In the current paper the focus is on finding a new approach to governing the volunteer commons.

Following in the footsteps of 2009 Nobel prize winner Elinor Ostrom, in this research we translate her eight design principles of robust resource pool governance into the arena of volunteering. The design principles are: clearly defined boundaries; local rules; collective-choice arrangements; effective monitoring; graduated sanctions; cheap conflict resolution; recognized self-determination; and nested enterprises (Ostrom 1990). We focus on the possible role of volunteer centers and (national and local) foundations in making these eight principles possible on a local scale.

Thus, our research addresses the following questions: How can volunteer centers / foundations define the stakeholders that are part of the local volunteer commons? How can volunteer centers / foundations create local rules for using volunteer energy? What kind of collective choice mechanisms can be applied to volunteering? How can the status of volunteering be monitored? What kind of sanctions can be applied to local (or non-local) organizations that enlist volunteer labor but use management systems that are detrimental to sustaining the volunteer (natural) resource? How can conflicts on the use of scarce volunteers be resolved? Are volunteer centers / foundations seen as an independent body that can make decisions on volunteering in the community? How does volunteering relate to other modules of participation (“nested enterprises”) like paid work, education and family obligations?

Based upon a literature review of the application of the eight principles for the governance of other commons, we will develop an initial model of governing the volunteer energy commons. Based upon this initial model, we will interview volunteer centers and foundations in both the Netherlands and he USA. We also plan on organizing several roundtable sessions with stakeholders of the volunteer energy commons. The result will be a model of governing the volunteer energy commons.

References
