Volunteering, Active Citizenship and Community Cohesion: From theory to practice

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1. Introduction

Volunteering and active citizenship are increasingly linked, in government policies and political discourse, to community cohesion and civil renewal, both of which would be seen, in terms of the themes of this conference, to underpin aspects of local security. The argument is made that the more that people engage in voluntary activities the more that they will feel part of their communities and build social capital, and the more that communities will become safer places.

In many countries around the world government policies have reinforced this link and developed initiatives to promote its growth. In the UK, for example, the New Labour government since 1997 has given an unprecedented level of attention, and funding, to the development of volunteering and active citizenship with the intentions of generating civil renewal and community cohesion.

These assumptions pose questions for this conference and for research generally on what evidence there is:

- to substantiate the link between voluntary activities, community cohesion and local security; and
- to understand and advise on the role that government policies can play in influencing whether or not people choose to engage in such actions.

The empirical base for assumptions about the role of voluntary action in developing communities and the role of governments in encouraging voluntary action needs to be strengthened.

This paper focuses on the second question to review available research-based knowledge and to help formulate future research. We take the question in two parts:

- For what reasons do people volunteer?
What can government do to enable and encourage their volunteering?

We then suggest lines of research which could underpin improvements in policy and practice, and could offer opportunities for collaborative and transnational studies.

This is an over-ambitious plan, but we attempt here to clarify and structure the research questions and note research which is helping us make steps towards a fuller literature review and proposals for research. The research cited here mostly represents what was accessible to us from previous projects, but we hope it prompts suggestions about other studies. We have only accessed English-language materials, largely UK-based.

Thus, we offer this paper as a basis for discussion and guidance, and as a step to developing research programmes in collaboration with colleagues. We would welcome all comments, corrections and suggestions.

We follow the common definition of volunteering as ‘any activity which involves spending time, unpaid, doing something which aims to benefit someone (individuals or groups) other than or in addition to close relatives, or to benefit the environment’ (Davis Smith 1998a pp13-14) and which is done out of free will (not compelled or coerced). By ‘formal’ volunteering we refer to that ‘carried out for, or through, an organisation or group’; by ‘informal’ we refer to volunteering ‘outside of an organisational context and on an individual basis’ (Davis Smith 1998a, p14).

Different countries have different patterns and forms of volunteering (eg, Dekker and Halman, 2003). Research by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) leading up to the designation of International Year of Volunteering 2001 created a typology of volunteering, categorising: service delivery or philanthropy; campaigning or advocacy; participation or civic engagement; and mutual aid or self-help (Davis Smith, 2000).

Thus, in terms of the research questions and their relationship to policy, there is a need to distinguish between different kinds of voluntary action and to assess separately:

- the ways in which they are enabled and encouraged by government measures; and
- the ways in which they contribute to the cohesion of particular communities.

The key concepts used in this policy domain are contested and affected by cultural factors: on volunteering, see Lukka and Ellis (2001) and Lukka and Locke (2003); on ‘community’, whether geographical, interest, identity, see Locke (2006), Ellis (2001), Ellis et al (2004), Taylor (2003); on social capital and its different forms, as used to substantiate policy on community, see Jochum et al (2005).
At first sight, the first question above about the link between voluntary action and community cohesion looks easily answered. Communities rely on people’s voluntary action, at least in a broad definition of voluntary action, including ‘informal’ volunteering. The social relationships which make a community are conducted through voluntary acts, as defined above. Communities are cohesive, perhaps some more than others, but a community necessarily has some cohesion.

The research report from the UK Home Office *Cohesive Communities and Crime* considers that cohesive communities have five key attributes: sense of community, similar life opportunities, respect for diversity, political trust and sense of belonging. Local areas with a high sense of community, political trust and sense of belonging were found to show significantly lower levels of ‘all’ reported crime. The sense of community factor was the strongest predictor of various types of recorded crime (Home Office Online Report 19/06, 2006).

However, without getting drawn into a long discussion of ‘it all depends on what you mean by…’, we note that future research would need to be explicit about which usages of the terms ‘volunteering’, ‘community’ and ‘cohesion’ are to be applied and investigated empirically.

Before answering what impact volunteering has on community cohesion, however, or what government can do to develop volunteering to this end, we need to understand the reasons why people volunteer in the first place. Only by understanding why people volunteer will we be able to understand what government can do to influence their decisions.

2. For what reasons do people volunteer?

The reasons why people volunteer are clearly very complex and have been investigated through a range of academic disciplines. For the purpose of this study, we seek to sketch a broad picture of the different factors and especially to include those factors which are susceptible to government action and public policy. Thus, we suggest research-based knowledge can be seen in terms of:

- psychological and attitudinal factors;
- social and personal background issues;
- perceptions of community and participation;
- situational factors.

Our general view is that the four headings are, very broadly, in an ascending order of factors which might be engineered by governments in trying to encourage volunteering.

We note that research into these questions has commonly studied specific and isolated episodes of voluntary action, often within specific agencies or
programmes, and at specific points in time, and when we suggest lines of development for research in Section 4 we will note the need for studies on a more general basis.

*Psychological and attitudinal factors*

Research about the reasons why people volunteer has largely focussed on the personal or motivational factors in individuals' decisions. There is a foundation of research which focuses on motivation, applying theories of psychology (eg, Aguiling-Dalisay et al 2004; Butcher 2003; Clary et al 1992; Clary et al 1996). This material has been reviewed fully (eg Dekker and Halman 2003), and in this paper we will not add to this.

*Social and personal background issues*

Strong predictors of volunteering have been found in personal background and social factors, notably levels of education (eg Wilson, 2000; Sundeen and Raskoff, 1994) and having social networks and ties (Rochcon, 1998, Ryan et al 2005).

Recent studies have examined more detailed aspects of such factors. Rotolo and Wilson (2006a and b) analysed data from the USA Current Population Survey and identified effects on volunteering of employment and marriage. Employees of non-profit organisations were more likely to volunteer than those in other sectors; and public sector workers more than private and self-employed sectors; managers more than blue collar workers. Interesting differences according to the type of volunteering were identified; for instance, despite the above, non-profit workers were no more likely than others to volunteer for adult sports activities (Rotolo and Wilson 2006a). Husbands and wives influence their spouses' extent and activities in volunteering (Rotolo and Wilson 2006b). They cited Wuthnow (1995): 'Women are more likely to regard caring as an expression of their selfhood, whereas men are more likely to associate caring with specific roles they play' (p166), and go on to consider that 'men's volunteering is contingent on the women in their lives' (p316).

Studies of personal backgrounds have tended to find a variety of family and other circumstances influence patterns of volunteering. Parents' volunteering is influential (Sundeen and Raskoff, 1994). Wilson (2000) (cited in Rotolo and Wilson 2006b) reports those more likely to volunteer are married people rather than singles, parents of school-age children rather than those of infant children and than spouses without children.

Faith is commonly treated as a principal motivation for volunteering. Putnam (2001) finds faith as the strong predictor of civic involvement. Lukka and Locke (2000), in a review of the literature on faith-based voluntary action, noted the difficulties of distinguishing the motivation in a person's faith from the institutional influences such as the membership and leadership of the faith organisation. Lukka and Locke (2003), in an exploratory study of voluntary action in faith-based communities in England, quoted faith leaders’ expositions of the aspects of their faith which underpinned their voluntary action and showed the
dependence of these communities on a wide variety of voluntary activities, informal and formal, from flower-arranging to youth clubs.

According to the Home Office Citizenship Survey conducted in England and Wales, almost two-thirds of the respondents (across all faiths) reported that they were currently involved in some form of informal volunteering and almost two in every five took part in formal volunteering activities. However, when all the socio-economic characteristics were considered, occupational status, educational attainment and age were more closely associated with civic participation and formal volunteering than religious affiliation (Home Office 2003).

Membership of minority ethnic communities - which in some policy debate is confused with membership of faith groups - has been treated as a predictor of less involvement in formal volunteering but more involvement in informal volunteering (IVR 2004). However, the apparently lower levels of formal volunteering found in previous research among minority communities is a more complex issue. In England and Wales considerable variations among minority ethnic groups in participation in both formal and informal volunteering were found in the Home Office Citizenship Survey; and the group with the highest participation in formal volunteering was Asian people born in the UK (Home Office 2004).

**Perceptions of community**

Davis Smith (1998a) tentatively from the UK National Survey of Volunteering indicated that feelings of place affected people’s decision to volunteer; and the Home Office Citizenship Survey found people who enjoyed living in a neighbourhood were more likely to engage in formal and informal volunteering (Home Office 2004). Locke et al (2001) from their small-scale study in East London noted that it did not mean people needed to feel good about the place - it could be a commitment to living there. Ryan et al (2005) conjectured that individuals might be attached to a ‘community of place’, not just to other individuals, and connected this as a form of social or emotional capital.

Ellis (2001) examined how ideas of community in rural Wales influenced people’s participation in community development activities. Motivations to volunteer in this context were shaped by people’s understandings and expectations of community and rurality. For some, participation was an unquestioned part of rural community life - intrinsic to the very notion of the rural idyll they aspired to; for others volunteering was part of a strategy to become part of ‘a community’ - especially when they had recently moved to an area; for others participation was a means to realise personal objectives, such as boosting the local economy to help keep their own business afloat. For those who ‘chose’ not to participate this might also be related to understanding of community - feeling ‘outside a community’ or more actively being ‘excluded’ from that community.

Ryan et al (2005) explored how far in small communities in the American Midwest voluntary participation was explained in terms of theories of rational choice or social embeddedness. They found that the empirical evidence supported both positions and concluded ‘solidarity of interests’ and ‘solidarity of sentiment’
affected each other. This led them into a conjectural discussion of how ‘community attachment’ might be seen as a form of social capital.

In the context of community, there is a need to be aware of cultural factors in shaping the kinds of voluntary action which are encouraged and discouraged in different communities. One feature may be a distinction between free will and obligation. Wilkinson-Maposa et al (2005) explored relationships between altruism, reciprocity and co-operation among poor communities in southern Africa, demonstrating the significance of duty and obligation in horizontal philanthropy.

*Situational factors*

In most studies, the majority motivation or reason for volunteering was ‘being asked’ or ‘word of mouth’ (eg Davis Smith 1998a). We think it might be helpful to separate this as a different mode of reason or motivation than, say, attitude or social factors such as education.

The question of how far the availability of time affects people’s decisions to volunteer does not produce a clear answer. The Home Office Citizenship Survey found: ‘[P]eople with apparently the least time available tend to be most active in the community’ (Home Office 2003 p201); this analysis was by group characteristics, and inquiries of individuals have suggested that lack of time has deterred people.

Research carried out at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) (England) showed that people are more inclined to get involved if it is something in which they have a personal interest or feel strongly about, especially if it is associated to a perceived threat. Importantly though, people seem more likely to get involved if they think they are going to enjoy the experience. The success of community events and leisure activities demonstrates how important the social and convivial dimension of participation is (Jochum et al 2005, Steel et al 2006) (see also Ellis 2001 for similar conclusions).

Events that made people angry such as the closure of a local post office or the lack of child care facilities stimulated some people to voluntary action in protests and campaigns (Locke et al 2001; Ellis 2001).

Karkatsoulis et al (2005) demonstrated that national identity was a major motivational factor for volunteers at the Athens 2004 Olympics and Paralympics.

Surveys have identified a wide range of reasons for volunteering from wanting ‘to improve things’, having ‘time to spare’ and ‘chance to learn new skills’ (Davis Smith 1998a). Individually instrumental reasons for enhancing skills and employability have featured more strongly in the view of volunteering as an ‘exchange relationship’.

Existing research suggests that one episode of volunteering leads to another. A strong predictor of volunteering is previous experience of volunteering (eg, Wilson and Musick, 1997), and it would seem that people usually do not engage in just one
form of volunteering (see, eg, Wilson and Musick, 1997). However, this may depend on the person not having a bad experience in volunteering (Locke et al 2003); poor organisation has been a major drawback in people’s experience of volunteering (Davis Smith 1998a).

There is much speculation about the link between civic participation (vertical participation) and civil participation (horizontal participation), but the evidence remains contested and contradictory. Nevertheless, effective vertical participation appears to be more difficult to achieve without the social connectedness that horizontal participation encourages (Chanan 2003).

Yates and Jochum (2003) showed how voluntary and community organisations in rural areas relied on a relatively limited pool of volunteers who were usually involved in several community activities simultaneously and often had a similar profile: over 50, accustomed to participation in formalised groups and benefiting from high levels of human and social capital. What some people might call the ‘usual suspects’. They also found that existing capacity building activity was primarily targeted at these committed ‘activists’ and failed to address the issues of wider community participation.

Voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) act as mediating institutions between the potential volunteer and the volunteering opportunity. Marshall (1996) argued that the only feature VCOs have in common is ‘their mediating feature - the fact that they give individuals a role and a place in social life and, potentially, social change’. Marshall’s analysis focuses on VCOs’ capacity to broker social change especially in relation to social values. The work NCVO did on active citizenship showed the importance of collective action through voluntary and community organisations; there is strength in numbers (Jochum et al 2005).

**Next steps**

To develop the body of research-based knowledge, we need to know more about what leads individuals to volunteer at different points in time and in different ways - both the personal motivations and the situational factors (Locke et al 2001; Locke et al 2003). In terms of the question posed for this paper, we need to understand more about which factors can be engineered by governments and public bodies.

Locke et al (2001), followed up by Locke et al (2003), suggested that it would be helpful for further inquiries into people’s volunteering by distinguishing between:

- predispositional factors;
- trigger factors.

Extending this idea, we might see predispositional factors as issues such as:

- personality or attitudinal factors;
- friends and family;
o faith / ethics;

o education, and related factors of class and income, job status;

o experience of volunteering before ;

o political, economic, social conditions, ideology or mood of country or community.

And trigger factors as:

o being asked;

o encounters and events;

o accessing a mediating body such as a voluntary or community organisation;

o time;

o having a specific need whether social or individual.

The range and interplay of factors affecting individuals suggests research to focus on how different forms and instances of volunteering are shaped and interconnected. Being aware of how people are often involved in a number of episodes over time and currently, it would be helpful to analyse people’s life-histories or careers of voluntary action. We need to introduce time, space and place into our studies of volunteering.

3. In what ways can government enable and encourage people to volunteer?

Whilst, as we indicate here, a body of research identifies a number of factors which are related to people’s volunteering, the key questions for policy-oriented research are about what out of this variety of factors governments can influence to encourage people to volunteer and to volunteer in ways consistent with public policy. Policies and programmes cannot yet draw on a depth of research-based evidence on the complexities of factors which frame and affect individuals’ decisions, some of which factors governments and agencies can influence, and on the design of policies and programmes likely to encourage people to volunteer.

Locke et al (1995) suggested that the scope of national government in promoting volunteering lay in creating a climate of opportunity for volunteering, ensuring that regulations (such as social benefits) and other policies did not act against individuals who wanted to volunteer, reviewing the rewards for volunteers, organising a national campaign and communications, and co-ordinating with local action. That study was to inform the UK government’s Make a Difference programme, and predated more specific support and funding for volunteering. It should be noted that in the UK system there was no need or function for legislation
to permit or endorse volunteering, whereas in other countries legislation may be required.

Recent research has indicated that people’s volunteering is affected by the changing political and social contexts within a country. Studies have considered the ways in which national governments have introduced legislation, policies and institutional support to encourage voluntary action (e.g., Butcher 2004; Ding 2000; Ding et al 2004; Davis Smith 1998b; Locke and Davis Smith 1999). IVR (2002a) in evaluating the International Year of Volunteers 2001 reviewed the impact of such government initiatives world-wide.

Arai (2004) suggested the nature of volunteering is affected by the ways different types of volunteering are emphasised by policy-makers at different times; in the case of Canada, Arai argued, this has led to a reinforcing of the concept of volunteering as benevolence and social control, and an undermining of its ability to influence social change and democracy. Warburton and Mutch (2000) argued that social and political change may impact upon people’s willingness to volunteer; in Australia recent policy changes may have affected people’s notions of freely given time, and may even turn people off volunteering.

Thus, research will need to resolve, for the purposes of the project, what kinds of actions are regarded as volunteering by national governments and what kinds are favoured or privileged, as well as how the research project identifies and names different actions. Some volunteering schemes where the volunteer is located outside their home area pay – with official support - a financial remuneration or living allowance which may look more like a wage than direct expenses, and may affect their relationships in the community where they are located.

The definition of volunteering for policy and policy-oriented research is set by government, in response to, variously, changing public usages, research findings or political pressure. Thus, inclusion of everyday acts of helping or service between people as ‘informal volunteering’ has been justified on grounds of equity, in that research found in countries such as the USA and UK that people from minority communities were more likely to be engaged informally than in formal volunteering (IVR 2004). This has been institutionalised in policy and official research (see for instance the UK government Home Office Citizenship Survey, Home Office 2003 and 2004). However, it may be contested that this is formalising actions which would be better understood simply as ‘helping’ or may be ‘incorporating’ community self-help into the state.

Questions have been raised whether some forms of volunteering may be privileged over others, such as the formal organisation-based form over informal assistance (Williams 2003a; Locke 2003). For policy development, it may be, for instance, necessary to investigate further whether:

- some formal volunteering through some kinds of voluntary organisation or public agency undermines informal volunteering or everyday help;
- some formal volunteering builds a ‘false consciousness’ of ‘community’;
an indigenous self-help in a community could be harmed by being incorporated into national policy on volunteering or dominated by a transnational hegemony of what constitutes volunteering or community;

- the impact on community is affected by whether the helping is out of obligation, or also by its roots in charity or mutuality.

In the UK voluntary organisations have reported falling volunteer levels as a result of risk aversion and perceptions of a ‘litigation society’ (Griffith et al 2006). As the public and institutional tolerance of risk has diminished regulations and insurance costs have increased, with consequences of, often, stifling innovative practices (and see Volunteering England 2005); current research by IVR is inquiring into these issues.

Systems of governance and accountability are affected by changes in the political and legislative environments and, in turn, have consequences for volunteering. The pressure of fuller monitoring and evaluation requirements of funders are reported to have added to volunteers’ workload and contributed to volunteer burnout (Yates et al 2004). NCVO’s work on community governance in rural areas showed community projects requiring a level of professionalism that potentially weakened their community dimension; the requirements of potential funders were impacting on the contribution of a limited pool of over-stretched individuals (Steel et al 2006).

Changing patterns of service provision as between public, non-profit and private sectors might influence volunteering patterns, as workers from non-profit organisations in the USA are more likely to volunteer, raising a question whether contracting out of public services to non-profits might increase or reduce numbers of volunteers (Rotolo and Wilson 2006a).

Locke et al (2001) suggested that how public services and officials responded to community leaders was important for reinforcing and sustaining them in their roles.

Brudney and Williamson (2000) examined how the internal organisation of public bodies, particularly the role of the volunteer co-ordinator, affected their implementation of government policies.

However, the consequences of the actions of government can be contrary, as Rotolo and Wilson’s (2006a) summary reminds us: ‘… [S]tate action can often trigger, rather than suppress, volunteer activity (e.g., failure to protect the environment brings forth environmental-action groups ...).’ And: ‘Far from stifling volunteerism, the growth of government stimulates it. Civil servants do not exhaust their motivation to perform public service in their paid work but seek to supplement it in unpaid work on behalf of voluntary organizations’ (p37).

Evaluation studies have found mechanisms or processes which worked or not in government-led volunteering programmes and schemes and have recommended
adjustments to programmes and improvements in volunteer management, mostly, as our studies have done, concentrating on one particular policy or programme (e.g. IVR 2002b). This literature - published and unpublished - could be examined in the meta-analysis suggested below.

In terms of policy and practice, there is a need to gain greater knowledge of how the acts of governments and volunteer-involving agencies, nationally and internationally, can affect people’s decisions. The Johns Hopkins University programme offers one approach to transnational and comparative studies of national systems and provisions. We suggest there is, alongside such large-scale projects, a need to develop comparative or transferable studies at small and specific scale for in-depth analysis of people’s decisions and actions for volunteering in different contexts.

We need now to move on to a further level of literature review or meta-analysis of the research to explore what mechanisms governments have to enable and encourage volunteering, and among them what works. Tentatively, from the above and from wider reading, we can identify factors or measures as:

- culture and social climate towards volunteering and community, and public and official definitions of volunteering;
- socio-economic conditions and employment conditions;
- legislation, policies and regulations, both specific to volunteering and others impacting on volunteering;
- funding;
- information;
- programmes and schemes to support volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations;
- infrastructure of mediating organisations, voluntary and community sector or third sector;
- training and capacity building for volunteer-involving organisations;
- working relationships with volunteer-involving organisations, partnership, independence;
- incentives for volunteers.

4. Towards a research agenda

Over recent years, as our review has indicated, a considerable body of research-based knowledge has developed about the reasons people volunteer and factors
which influence them. Many of the studies we have cited are small scale, set in particular circumstances or specific organisations or communities, and, whilst policy-makers and practitioners can draw on them for understanding and information, the accumulated wisdom does not provide clear direction for policy and practice. The questions we set at the start of this working paper need to be resolved into ones of greater particularity and specificity. The findings reported here were conducted in widely different communities, to different scales and with different conceptual frameworks.

We also note that studies tend to focus on either single episodes or general attitudes to volunteering. They do not present a picture or analysis of what we observe and experience first-hand - which is that people have complex histories and multiple episodes in their careers of voluntary action. If public policy is to encourage and support more volunteering, it would be helpful to know better about the complexities of people’s volunteering. It would also be helpful to know more about how individuals’ respond to government interventions connected to volunteering.

In this section, we sketch briefly some thoughts to try and advance the body of knowledge and to open discussions with colleagues about the potential for collaborations within and across national borders.

From reviewing the existing research-based knowledge, we suggest that further research needs to explore the complexities of individuals’ histories and connections across communities, and to analyse the factors which have shaped their involvement and experience of community, such as their feelings of place, their social relationships, the role of voluntary and community organisations as mediating institutions, and policies, as well as their personal backgrounds and values.

The individuals’ voluntary action should be analysed in the context of policies and programmes seeking to promote voluntary action, exploring interrelationships between the policies or programmes and people’s ‘decisions’ to engage in voluntary action.

Having reviewed research-based knowledge on people’s continued volunteering, Locke et al (2003), as noted above, concluded it would be helpful to inquire using two bands of factors:

- dispositional and individual, which would be split motivational issues, as above, into predisposition and trigger;

- structural and institutional.

The structural and institutional factors would feature those mechanisms which, broadly and tentatively, can be influenced or controlled by government and mediating bodies.
From the review, we are impressed not only by the variety among small scale studies but also by the ways in which some limited and specific effects emerge from larger studies; for illustration, that non-profit workers are less likely to volunteer for adult sports (Rotolo and Wilson 2006a). We need to be careful about generalising and about treating the topic as a conglomerate.

Thus, a proposal for future research needs to specify:

- usages or definitions of the concepts like community, cohesion and social capital;
- and of the concepts of volunteering;
- the particular volunteering activities to be investigated;
- the kinds of communities;
- the characteristics of the individuals;
- what will be taken as evidence of these phenomena.

And to be explicit about how the inquiry relates to particular policies and programmes.

Finally we sketch for discussion and development some possibilities for fruitful areas of research as collaborative or comparative projects with colleagues:

*Meta-analysis of existing research*

A summary literature like this paper could be developed further by a meta-analysis of the findings about the relationships between volunteering and community cohesion and between public policy and volunteering. As noted, many of the studies reviewed are quite small scale, cases or particular projects, and are set within different institutional and politico-social conditions. Further inquiry would uncover more ‘grey literature’, local cases, programme evaluations (some of which would only be usable if anonymised or disguised) and other work which also would not be susceptible to straightforward policy direction or generalisation.

The meta-analysis could seek to identify particulars and generalities on:

- reasons or motivations for volunteering, adopting a distinction, as above, between predisposition to volunteer and triggers or access to particular opportunities;
- impacts or consequences of public policy and institutional factors on individuals so as to discover what factors under the influence or control of public policy can be engineered to encourage the kinds of volunteering sought by public policy;
the ways in which volunteering has impacted on community cohesion and cohesion between communities.

**Individuals - connections over time**

As we noted above, it would be helpful for some research to explore in depth the complexity of people’s engagement in multiple episodes over time and concurrently and to analyse their volunteering life-histories in relation to factors which have shaped them. For inquiring into the question about the impact of government action, inquiries into individuals’ life-stories of volunteering would:

- establish how one episode leads to another (or not), and how people engage in different kinds of volunteering;
- analyse how people’s decisions to volunteer are affected by changing political, social and economic conditions in deciding to volunteer;
- explore how far it is possible to relate people’s decisions to volunteer to specific policies and government measures.

**Communities - connections over space**

We need to know more about how communities are formed and sustained by people’s voluntary actions over time and spatial connections, and how this could be related to social cohesion and / or social capital. Inquiries would:

- analyse how individual volunteers’ activities are located in organisations and geographical and interest/identity communities;
- and how they connect with other volunteers, organisations and communities.

These inquiries would need to be in-depth and focused qualitatively on individuals and their situations. It would be an interesting but highly complex research task to combine the studies of individuals’ life-stories and of their community connections.

**International comparative study**

A first stage in international comparative or collaborative research would be situational analyses of:

- systems, legislation and policy environments;
- infrastructure and mediating structures of voluntary and community organisations;
- existing research, local and organisational evaluations, ‘grey literature’ etc;
professional know-how of impact of the systems and structures on people's volunteering.

They would need to consider cultural factors such as ideologies of work, help and obligation. Such national analyses could take a time period as appropriate for policy and legislative changes in each country.

The next stages could explore how far the individual life-stories and/or community connections could be set in a framework to produce data that could be analysed across different national systems.

**Further stages**

For applications to policy and practice, it would be helpful to support the qualitative investigations with a broader quantitative study, perhaps as a panel or a larger sample of interviews recording people’s multiple episodes of volunteering and relating to government measures and socio-economic conditions.

The complexity of the data and analysis about volunteering lives is unlikely to provide a simple direction for policy but the inquiries would generate understanding through which pilot programmes could be developed. The evaluations of the pilots could test government measures and develop knowledge to more securely underpin policy in future.

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