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The Image of Volunteering in Popular Culture

Andy Fryar (Convening Editor, Australia)

The May 2003 Hot Topic (<http://energizeinc.com/hot/2003/03may.html>) on the Energize Web site discussed how volunteers are portrayed through television and film in North America – and site visitors added more examples.

At *e-Volunteerism*, we were intrigued by the response the Hot Topic stimulated and, further, we were also interested to learn how volunteering was portrayed in parts of the world other than the USA and Canada. Specifically:

- Did it differ greatly from the North American experience?
- Were there variations between different countries (other than the US)?
- If so, what were the stimulating factors behind these differences?
- What role does the traditional culture of other countries play in the portrayal of volunteerism?
- Are there stereotypes of volunteers and do they differ from those found in North America ?

To answer these questions, we invited a panel of international volunteering experts to join us in a Keyboard Roundtable discussion on the subject.

Participants

Gesa Birnkraut (Germany)

Gesa Birnkraut has a background in business administration and arts management. She wrote her PhD on the topic of volunteering in the arts, comparing the US and Germany. After being the general manager of the Institute for Arts and Media Management

(*Institut für Kultur- und Medienmanagement*) in Hamburg, Germany, for the past two years, Dr. Birnkraut founded her own company in 2004: BirnkrautHein - Arts & Business Consultants. Their one main focus is consulting with arts institutions and for-profit companies in volunteer management and corporate volunteering.

Gesa was an invited speaker at the 2002 and 2003 International Conferences on Volunteer Administration, the ISTR (International Society for Third Sector Research) conference 2002 (an abstract of her presentation can be seen at <http://www.jhu.edu/~istr/conferences/capetown/abstracts/birnkraut.html>), and the Fundraising Conference in Germany in 2004.

Mikheil (Misha) Kechaqmadze (Georgia)

I am a 24-year-old young guy motivated to help my country to become civil and democratic. I am a volunteer manager at the [Youth Resource Center of Guria](#), which was established through the cooperation of the Peace Corps of America in April 2002. It is a non-profit, non-governmental organization with a mission of facilitating the process of civic society development in Georgia. Among our objectives are: Raise civic awareness amongst the population of Georgia; protect the rights of the children and youth; support establishment of democratic institutions in Georgia, etc. The Center pays much attention to promoting volunteerism in Georgia. Our volunteers' developed network enables us to work on solving many problems our country is facing now. We closely cooperate with local non-governmental organizations and with international organizations as well.

I have 5 years experience of being both volunteer and volunteer manager. I am proud to say that as far as I know I am the only certified volunteer manager in the whole country. Now we are working on establishing the Regional Network of Volunteer Organizations of the Black Sea States. Any organization is welcomed to join us. Do contact us (slipina@yahoo.com). Let's make the World a better place to live...

Patricia Nabti, PhD (Lebanon)

Dr. Patricia Nabti was born in Santa Rosa, California, USA. Although she received the majority of her early education in the United States, she spent one year as a high school exchange student in Egypt through American Field Service (AFS). Three years later she attended the American University of Beirut in Lebanon for one year on the Stanford-AUB Exchange Program. She later received a BA in Political Science and an MA in Education, both from Stanford University. Patricia then obtained her PhD in Cultural Anthropology from the University of California at Berkely. In 1992, after teaching for three years at Stanford University's program in Cultures, Ideas, and Values, Patricia became a professor of anthropology at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

In 1998, after six years at AUB, she decided to take a (temporary?) leave from academia to found the first and only volunteer association/center in Lebanon: -- the [Association for Volunteer Services](#) (AVS). As models for the AVS, she used her experiences as a volunteer both in the United States and in Lebanon and her exposure to the Haas Center

for Public Service at Stanford, the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County (Santa Rosa, California), and Service-Learning 2000. Patricia, a dual American/Lebanese citizen, is the only current member of board or staff of the AVS (a Lebanese organization) to be of foreign origin.

Tan Chee Koon (Singapore)

Tan Chee Koon is the Executive Director of the [National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre](#) (NVPC) of Singapore. The Centre's mission is to promote volunteerism as a way of life in Singapore, across all the different sectors. She was appointed in August 1999 to establish the publicly funded Centre, which currently operates with a team of 12. Before assuming the challenge of getting more Singaporeans into active citizenship, she was the Director of Corporate Communications of the National Heritage Board, which administers the National Museums of Singapore and the National Archives. In this capacity, she was responsible for building the pool of museum guides (docents) of the three national museums as well as raising volunteers for the popular Children's Discovery Gallery, working with the Friends of the Museum organisation. Over this period, the board successfully attracted locals to join its docent pool. Tan Chee Koon is an active church volunteer. She runs a tuition centre for low-income children in her church's neighbourhood, and she sits on the Management Committee of her church's new childcare and student care center. She also is a member of a local community council.

The Questions

Question 1: In your country, when a member of the general public hears someone mention the word 'volunteer', what 'images' do you believe the majority of people think of? (*Is there a volunteer stereotype and what do you think are the origins of this stereotype?*)

Question 2: What (*if any*) media coverage/airplay do volunteers and volunteering receive in your country? Can you think of any instances where the role has been featured (either positively or negatively) by the popular media?

Question 3: In many western countries, there is a huge push to get younger people involved in volunteering. This has occurred through using a wide variety of media and 'marketing tools' in order to attract youth to volunteering. What, if anything, has occurred (or is occurring) in your country to draw young people into volunteering using popular media?

Question 4: Are there any/many good examples of leading figures in your country (politicians, sport stars, celebrities etc) being known for the voluntary work that they do? Tell us about these examples and explain how influential you think these role models are in encouraging others to become a volunteer.

Question 5: Most of you felt that volunteering is not portrayed in your mass media nor is part of your popular culture. May I ask you to reconsider the question from another perspective? Often what we on this list would label as "volunteering" is not called by that name, yet the activity exists. Some examples:

- Most religions of the world ask their followers to do acts of charity for the poor, sick, orphaned, old, etc.
- Most democracies create change when passionate citizens unite to protest or lobby the government. Under Communism, this activity became the "underground"--keeping dissident views alive.
- Average people who become heroes and heroines because they stepped in to do something on their own just because it needed to be done and no one else was doing it--eventually creating a movement or forcing the government to make changes.

Given this broad definition of "volunteering," can you think of fictional figures in your country's past or present who are engaged in these types of activities and therefore are role models for helping (or held up for ridicule as silly, etc.)?

Question 6: It appears that volunteering is portrayed more strongly and given more recognition by popular culture in places such as the US and Canada, where a more established framework of volunteerism exists. Do you think that this is necessarily a good thing and is it a model you would desire to replicate in your own country if you could? Tell us why you do or don't think this would work in your own culture.

Andy Fryar (Convening Editor, Australia)

In your country, when a member of the general public hears someone mention the word 'volunteer', what 'images' do you believe the majority of people think of? (*Is there a volunteer stereotype and what do you think are the origins of this stereotype?*)

Tan Chee Koon (Singapore)

Certainly, when people in my country think "volunteer", they think about the social service type of volunteers (i.e., the bleeding heart category), moved by compassion for the poor, sick and needy. This is because the social service sector has been the largest "consumer" of volunteers and has been actively promoting the use of volunteers through the umbrella body, the National Council of Social Services (NCSS).

NCSS has a volunteer promotion arm dedicated to raising volunteers to help in the various Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs), especially those funded by them. By comparison, the other umbrella bodies that supervise the work of volunteer hosting organisations in the area of sports, arts, environment and others have not had the benefit of as long a history as NCSS has in engaging volunteers.

These other sectors are also not as pervasive as the social services sector, which is obviously where the greatest area of need is. NCSS has just recently launched its Social Service Volunteers' Circle in an attempt to "brand" these volunteers, for a stronger sense of identity and belonging.

(One of NVPC's key messages is, in fact, that volunteering is not just about social services, to appeal to those who are motivated by different levers).

Misha Kechaqmadze (Georgia)

This is really good question, thank you.

As you know, Georgia for 70 years was the part of Soviet Union and it regained independence only 12 years ago. Here I will have to give detailed information about trends in volunteerism in those times, because the current poor situation with volunteerism in Georgia mainly results from the force-it approach that once dominated in that totalitarian country.

During the Soviet period, charity and volunteerism in Georgia was initiated by directives from the Center. Non-governmental forms of public activity were not welcomed. We can evaluate the development of the voluntary movement and organizations during the Soviet period as being compulsory, institutionalized and controlled by state organisations. This was simply due to the fact that, in totalitarian society, it is impossible for forms of social self-organization (which are not under the wardship of the state's administrative and command system) to exist.

Some of you might have heard about SUBOTNIK – a working bee where people had to obey the directives by the state organisations and had to work without pay on weekends. Of course there was the element of compulsion in this form of charitable donation! Such events were accompanied with the soviet-style slogans like 'he who does not work, he does not eat' and 'we will be living in Communism in 1980' (of course we did not) or – I like this most (most stupid slogan I have ever heard) – 'Soviet patient is the healthiest patient in the world'!

I think you now clearly see that after the Soviet Empire collapsed, people would not even think of volunteering as has been associated with compulsion and were some of the most awful experiences in their life. Most people shrink from the idea of volunteering because of their past experiences.

There is also another problem with volunteerism in Georgia – people here are either very rich or very poor. We almost do not have the middle class. Why is this a problem? Because it has been observed by some volunteer experts in post-soviet countries that most volunteers come from the middle class!

I personally believe that it is very hard, if not impossible, to teach an old dog new tricks and so I believe we should pay the utmost attention to promoting volunteerism in Georgian youth. In this regard my organization has been very successful.

To summarize my answer, the old mentality and past awful experiences with volunteerism in Georgia do not allow us to have great hope that we will be able to promote volunteerism to adults or get many of them to volunteer. Luckily, though, our young people really show devotion to volunteering!

To tell the truth, I think that Georgia is a very appropriate place to conduct various research projects in volunteerism – to observe how volunteering gets developed in a country where, just 15 years ago, it was associated only with compulsion.

Patricia Nabti (Lebanon)

In Lebanon , when we speak of volunteering, the first problem we have is the term itself.

In Arabic, as in English, the word "volunteer" can refer to:

- One who contributes to the social good with his/her time, without financial compensation (what I understand in French means "benevolat").
- One who gets paid a nominal stipend to work full-time for good, often in some other country like a Peace Corp or UN Volunteer.
- Freely choosing to do particular work – like a soldier in a volunteer army (who is paid, but enlists rather than being drafted).

As an organization established to "promote, facilitate and improve volunteering," the Association for Volunteer Services (AVS) is concerned only with definition 1 above, as I assume the rest of you are. But the confusion in the term sometimes makes our work more difficult.

This is especially true in terms of UN Volunteers here, who are given a stipend of US\$800 or more (considerably more than most in full time employment). The UN Volunteer Programme has the authority of the UN behind it, and is thus perceived as the "specialists" in volunteering. But UNV ambiguity between definitions (1) and (2) confuses people about what volunteering really is.

One thing that is not included in the Lebanese concept of volunteering is what is often called "*informal volunteering*" elsewhere. The Lebanese consider it a social obligation to help relatives, friends and neighbors without expecting a direct financial return. In this way everyone becomes part of a mutual help network that serves as a safety net to deal with personal problems.

This type of informal volunteering is largely lost in many modern societies where government, insurance, and other formal programs provide an impersonal safety net for most people.

Informal volunteering also usually does not address or provide awareness of broader social concerns like the environment, or cut across social barriers of race, religion or ethnicity, or provide the professional guidance that many issues need (cancer, AIDS, many disabilities, etc.). For these, more formal volunteering with non-government organizations and institutions is needed.

A real problem in Lebanon is that people see such volunteering as a waste of time because it is "doing something for nothing." Most people do not see volunteering as doing something for one of a myriad of valued and acceptable incentives other than financial compensation (social change, self-satisfaction, self-esteem, skills, experience, fun, friends, contacts, awareness of social problems, a meaningful way to fill one's time, etc.). Since it is seen as foolish to "do something for nothing" and somehow "immoral" or "unethical" to have alternative incentives other than pure altruism (doing good for its own sake) – people tend to be suspicious of volunteers and their motives. At AVS we try to encourage altruism, but make it clear that it is both possible and acceptable to seek various non-financial benefits from volunteering. Put in that perspective, people have become more willing to volunteer for NGOs and social institutions.

I think our biggest problem in Lebanon, though, is not that people have negative feelings about volunteering – most people simply don't think about volunteering at all, except perhaps in times of crisis. They generally do not see volunteering as one of many alternative ways to fill the time that is not already committed to work, study, or social obligations. They thus do not make a conscious choice whether to volunteer or not, choosing not to because of some negative feeling they have about volunteering – for most people, volunteering is simply not a recognized option.

Gesa Birnkraut (Germany)

Volunteering has a very long tradition in Germany, mostly in the social field but also in sports and ecological associations. Volunteering in the arts can only be found in the socio-cultural field or smaller arts institutions with no or very few full paid staff. You rarely find the concept of volunteering in large arts institutions. We also have a very strong state responsibility in Germany for social services and for arts institutions, so the funding still is very strong. One of the biggest problems is that the citizens themselves don't see it is their responsibility to act for their community.

The direct translation for volunteering in German is '*Ehrenamt*' and this word has a quite traditional and dusty connotation. So whenever you ask people – especially young people – about their feelings about *Ehrenamt* they will often think only of non-flexible volunteer opportunities that bind you for a long time and have a lot to do with the work of associations.

In the past five to six years there has been a discussion emerging which began on an 'expert' level but then also became part of a public discussion about the importance of civil society and the responsibility of the citizen for his/her own community. The government created a cross-party working group to focus on the situation of volunteering in German society, its legal situation and how it could be supported and promoted. So volunteering is changing at the moment into a more modern and contemporary trend with more short-term volunteering opportunities and more meaningful volunteer work. Even in the arts it is beginning to be of some importance. For example, the Institute for Arts and Media Management in Hamburg is implementing a volunteer program for the symphony orchestra in Berlin at the moment.

This change of attitude is also evident in the results of our latest study, where we interviewed 125 young people between 16 and 27 who participated in a voluntary cultural year in the arts (which is civic service on a voluntary basis).

When asked a question about what image they believe volunteering has in general, 45% indicated that it has a 'good' image, 25% answered that they believed volunteering had a 'partly bad and partly good' image, while 26% said it has a bad image.

When asked the same question, the 123 institutions who participated in this voluntary cultural year answered our survey as follows: 8.3% believed volunteering had a negative image; 14.7% were neutral; 66.9% believed volunteering was viewed positively; while 10.1% thought it was 'very positive'.

Andy Fryar (Convening Editor, Australia)

What (if any) media coverage/airplay do volunteers and volunteering receive in your country?

Can you think of any instances where the role has been featured (either positively or negatively) by the popular media?

Gesa Birnkraut (Germany)

The image of volunteers in the media in Germany has changed over recent years. There are positive reports, especially on public radio about volunteers and new trends in volunteering. For example, the Konzerthaus project in Berlin got two reports on public radio and a live interview on a radio show.

Print press and TV are more hesitant about this topic – they are more likely to look at other countries like the US where volunteerism is already a functioning system. They often forget that the US and Germany *do* have different political and societal systems, so you cannot just compare the two one on one.

And of course these are only reports. In Germany we don't have any volunteers in the

daily sitcoms or in movies.

Patricia Nabti (Lebanon)

This is a tough question for me since I am not a native Arabic speaker, so I don't tend to watch locally produced sitcoms, movies, etc., though I often watch Arabic talk shows.

I do recall one story/program however. We featured it at the press conference we held to launch Global Youth Service Days two years ago, because the main actor was one of our two Celebrity Youth Volunteers for that year. Red Cross emergency response volunteers were featured in the show and were presented very positively.

I asked others to help me with this question. They responded that Red Cross and other civil defence volunteers are often featured in shows where ambulances fit into the plot, and it is generally recognized that these are volunteers. One person also remembered a recent episode of "Felicity" (a US or British show?) that featured a pre-med student who was advised to volunteer in order to be able to get into medical school. He joined a Big Brother-type mentoring organization and gradually developed a positive attitude to the experience. This was not a local show, but it did have an impact on the local community.

Beyond this, non-profit organizations are regularly featured on daytime talk shows to discuss their causes, though there is rarely any reference to volunteering, so it is often unclear if those being interviewed are staff or volunteers.

As a Volunteer Center, we have had no difficulty getting media coverage (TV, radio, print media) of our programs, and have often arranged to have affiliated organizations featured to discuss their volunteering options.

I am very glad that this Roundtable drew my attention to [Susan's Hot Topic](#) on the subject. I have down loaded the article and plan to send it to the Producer of a number of TV series and the Director of a TV station, both friends of AVS, to see if they might incorporate some of Susan's ideas into their shows.

I think the problem is not that people are negative to such ideas, they simply haven't thought of them, and so haven't seen them as options to consider. It is our role to raise their consciousness and now that you have raised mine about these ideas, I will try to do that here in Lebanon.

Misha Kechaqmadze (Georgia)

Unfortunately I have to say that I can hardly recall any noteworthy volunteer coverage in the media that I have seen in my country. I am sure this is because of the low level of volunteerism development.

The media in their articles reflect the general situation that exists in the country and not

surprisingly, because we have only a small number of volunteers, the media seem not to pay any real attention to them.

Volunteerism in Georgia is in its infancy and there is much to do in this country to promote it. In responding to question 1 of this roundtable, I explained why, in post-Soviet countries, we do not have developed volunteerism. You may then be interested to learn about the media coverage on volunteerism in the former Soviet Union .

Soviet volunteers who were featured in the media were always smiling, speaking in slogans and calling other people to come to help the Soviet homeland to enter into communism as quickly as possible – of course everybody knew that it was flat society propaganda! However, now as Georgians are struggling to establish a civic and democratic society in their homeland, volunteerism, without any doubt, will play a very important role in this process.

Andy Fryar (Convening Editor, Australia)

In many western countries, there is a huge push to get younger people involved in volunteering. This has occurred through using a wide variety of media and 'marketing tools' in order to attract youth to volunteering.

What, if anything, has occurred (or is occurring) in your country to draw young people into volunteering using popular media?

Gesa Birnkraut (Germany)

While everyone seems to be conscious in Germany that we need the interest of young people in volunteering, there are very few activities for promoting volunteering to young people in the popular media with the exception of a few advertisements by sporting associations.

The social field still has a lot of young men doing their mandatory civic service – there is a mandatory military service for every young man in Germany, but you can say no to the Army and instead do a social civic service – which is of course not voluntary! We also have so called '*voluntary social years*' for boys and girls – which can be done in the social field, sports, ecology or arts.

In spite of the above, there is very little done to promote volunteerism for young people in the media or by the institutions or association themselves.

Misha Kechaqmadze (Georgia)

I think I have to start by telling you a few words about my current role.

I am working in close cooperation with American Peace Corps volunteers implementing

a project to promote volunteerism to youth in Guria (western Georgia). Within this framework, the Peace Corps volunteers and I organize special training sessions for youth on the topic of volunteerism and provide them with detailed information on the general practices of volunteering.

At the conclusion of the training, we decide, in partnership with the youth, what problems our society is facing that we could solve. We then undertake a volunteer project aimed at solving this problem. This is the first volunteer project in the whole region where youth are so actively involved.

Generally in Georgia, youth are the most active participants in the process of establishing and promoting civic and democratic society. Unfortunately the media does not cover their volunteer activities well and only occasionally can you read or watch a report about the work young volunteers are involved in.

During the above-mentioned project we will try to offer as much media coverage as possible to the youth volunteers. We plan to use TV stations, newspapers and magazines in the region, so that people can learn about the wonderful work youth volunteers are doing.

Patricia Nabti (Lebanon)

As far as I know, other than the Association of Volunteer Services (AVS), there is no conscious use of the popular media in Lebanon as a marketing tool to get youth (or anyone else) involved in volunteering. The media are used to market non-profit organizations and their achievements, and to solicit funds, but I have never seen these same efforts used to attract volunteers for their causes.

This is an interesting point. Why do organizations use the media to fund their organizations, but not to encourage people to volunteer in them?

The primary exception to this are the media campaigns organized by AVS, since the promotion of volunteering is the major objective of our organisation, any TV, radio or print media coverage arranged for by AVS always highlights volunteering and often focuses on youth volunteering.

Our largest volunteer campaign each year is 'Global Youth Service Days', a weekend in April in which youth from a variety of organizations, schools and universities undertake a variety of volunteer projects. We have generally been able to arrange for very good coverage of this event, including guest spots on TV and radio – and lots of coverage in newspapers and magazines. This coverage includes pre-event opportunities to encourage individuals and organizations to participate, as well as coverage of the events themselves.

In general we have tried to get spokespeople from participating organizations, youth

groups, and schools to do the interviews (including youth themselves), with a small percentage of these spots reserved for promoting the work of AVS itself.

Andy Fryar (Convening Editor, Australia)

Are there any/many good examples of leading figures in your country (politicians, sport stars, celebrities, etc.) being known for the voluntary work that they do?

Tell us about these examples and explain how influential you think these role models are in encouraging others to become a volunteer.

Patricia Nabti (Lebanon)

An Association of Volunteer Services (AVS) committee was meeting last night, so I posed this question to them.

Together they could come up with only one singer who is known to have volunteered before becoming a star who continues to volunteer. They also spoke about another singer who was invited to be an International Ambassador for UNESCO. While the Lebanese people were proud of her selection, they did not see her as someone good at encouraging volunteering.

In addition, stars often perform voluntarily for various causes – although their "volunteering" is not usually highlighted in a way that might encourage others to also volunteer.

The First Lady does attend a lot of charity events, promoting philanthropy for good causes. In fact, a large number of major events by NGOs in Lebanon are hosted "under the patronage" of a major political figure who is presumably volunteering that service. Many major political figures finance foundations or associations, are also involved in charity events, some explicitly using their names and some simply being known to the public as being associated with that cause. Some of these associations have very active volunteers that run them, while others have volunteer 'clubs' within them to do service outside the Association.

Many important people in business also have very high profile roles as board members of NGOs. In all these cases, however, the concept of "volunteering" is not directly connected to the patron, sponsor financier or board member. They are identified for their philanthropy and not for any volunteering they do.

One exception to this is the Minister of Social Affairs who promotes volunteering in his role as President of the National Committee on Volunteering – but I have never seen any reference to his own record of volunteering.

A more significant exception is AVS because our objectives include the promotion volunteering. At the suggestion of the International Coordinating Committee of Global

Youth Service Days (GYSD), AVS has arranged for youth celebrities to promote youth volunteering for GYSD. They generally give interviews, visit GYSD service projects, and hand out certificates of participation for GYSD project volunteers. We have had two actors, an actress, a former Miss Lebanon, and a poet serve in this role.

Gesa Birnkraut (Germany)

In Germany there are a lot of celebrities who are ambassadors for social or cultural welfare organisations. This is not however usually seen as volunteering in the sense of direct service volunteering – it is more associated with fundraising for a good cause.

Celebrities chair fundraising dinners or they build political lobbies for social causes. A lot of them also establish their own foundations or non-profit organisations, which help people in need. While this is viewed very positively, it really doesn't have anything to do with volunteering and the word " *Ehrenamt* " (the German word for volunteering) is not usually mentioned.

Patricia Nabti (Lebanon)

Yes – Germany seems just like Lebanon in this – other than our use of youth celebrities for Global Youth Service Days, and even those are usually 'spot' appearances, not long term commitments.

Misha Kechaqmadze (Georgia)

Unfortunately I cannot say that I recall any Georgian celebrity undertaking any noteworthy volunteer work or calling people to volunteer. I think the lack of leadership in volunteering from celebrities is caused by the same reasons that so many people of Georgia don't volunteer – because of a simplified understanding of volunteerism, bad past practices of forced volunteering under the Soviet regime and a weak civic society.

The only time that I have heard about a 'celebrity' calling Georgian people to volunteer was the US State Secretary Colin Powell. During his recent trip to Georgia , he was asked how Georgian youth should get actively engaged in the process of promoting democratic and civic society in our country. Mr. Powell responded by saying that best way would be for every youth to consider doing some volunteer work and contributing to their homeland's welfare.

Our organization, the Youth Resource Center of Guria, in close cooperation with two American organizations, Project Harmony and Peace Corps, is implementing a project aimed at promoting volunteerism in Georgian youth. I am proud to say that as far as I know it is the very first project aiming to promote volunteering to youth that has ever been implemented in Georgia .

Susan Ellis, Publishing Editor (USA) posed a follow-up question to the full group after she read the responses to the last question:

Most of you felt that volunteering is not portrayed in your mass media nor is part of your popular culture. May I ask you to reconsider the question from another perspective? Often what we on this list would label as "volunteering" is not called by that name, yet the activity exists. Some examples:

- Most religions of the world ask their followers to do acts of charity for the poor, sick, orphaned, old, etc.
- Most democracies create change when passionate citizens unite to protest or lobby the government. Under Communism, this activity became the "underground"— keeping dissident views alive.
- Average people who become heroes and heroines because they stepped in to do something on their own just because it needed to be done and no one else was doing it – eventually creating a movement or forcing the government to make changes.

Given this broad definition of "volunteering," can you think of fictional figures in your country's past or present who are engaged in these types of activities and therefore are role models for helping (or held up for ridicule as silly, etc.)?

Patricia Nabti (Lebanon)

I am assuming you are referring to fictional characters like Johnny Appleseed and Smoky the Bear. In both cases, they encourage people doing good – but I don't know if people would translate that into volunteering which to me is a more formal form of helping others. The volunteering we are promoting is not participating in a mutual aid society, or doing a random act of kindness. It is, ideally, a sustained commitment to working for some NGO or social institution or government entity without any financial return. I can't think of any fictional volunteers in Lebanon, but it would be a great idea to introduce some that could be emulated, especially by children.

Gesa Birnkraut (Germany)

I think a very good example for this is the whole ecological movement in Germany that started in the 1980s. I think Germany is now one of the world's leading countries in terms of developed ecological systems and it wouldn't have happened if there hadn't been such a huge volunteer movement.

At the moment it is the schools. I think every small community has its own heroes at the schools, because without the help of the parents the level of education will not be held.

So there are many little heroes in reality and of course big heroes like Mother Theresa, but I cannot think of any fictional role model for Germany .

Misha Kechaqmadze (Georgia)

Georgia is a Christian country and as you know Christianity asks their followers to help each other in need. After the many years of Soviet rule, when religion was totally banned, I see a growing number of people becoming religious and observing the rules set by Christianity. This could be one of the factors that might facilitate the process of promoting volunteerism.

Andy Fryar, Convening Editor (Australia)

It appears that volunteering is portrayed more strongly and given more recognition by popular culture in places such as the US and Canada, where a more established framework of volunteerism exists.

Do you think that this is necessarily a good thing and is it a model you would desire to replicate in your own country if you could? Tell us why you do or don't think this would work in your own culture.

Patricia Nabti (Lebanon)

As the Director of a volunteer center that is the only conscious entity to focus on volunteering in general (and not volunteering for a specific organization), this discussion brought to light a lot of issues we should consider, and possible ideas for us to try in Lebanon. One of these was concerned with getting volunteering into popular TV shows – whether as real issues consciously faced by the main characters or subtly as a passing comment. Personally, I think it is an excellent idea, and I want to give this article to a few key people who produce dramas to see what they might do.

As for VIPs and celebrities, people are grateful for their philanthropy, but they are rather cynical here about the many photo op activities that such people do – the token kindnesses. I don't think having the mayor ladle one bowl of soup in a soup kitchen would encourage real volunteering at the soup kitchen, though it might give good publicity for donating to that soup kitchen. It says that that man believes in that cause, so believe in it, too. Better than that, it would be great if that VIP ladled one bowl of soup and then turned to the volunteers to congratulate them for their work – that would be helpful – more as his recognition of them, than the public recognition of his volunteering. That is how we benefited from our celebrity volunteers for Global Youth Service Days the last two years.

On the other hand, if we could get such celebrities who are clearly committed to a particular cause, and really gave sustained support as volunteers, it would be helpful to publicize volunteering, especially if it is for a cause that serves society as a whole and not just that person's religious, political or regional constituency.

People are too used to getting show without substance here. Ideally it would be nice to publicize those who were volunteers before they became famous and continued after they became famous. That's hard to find, but would be worth the effort.

I have often said here that we need to make volunteering "popular" and the normal thing to do. We need to make it "fashionable" and not just a passing interest. Exposure in popular culture would help a lot.

Drawing on models of volunteering in traditional culture would also help, though we need to encourage people to be involved in modern forms of volunteering. We need to be careful to fit our efforts into the culture itself – drawing on local models, local programs and local celebrity volunteers so people can identify with it.

Gesa Birnkraut (Germany)

The US and Germany are in many ways similar (e.g., industry, economy, standard of living, etc.), but in the history and the political systems there are huge differences between both countries. This is especially true concerning volunteerism.

While the US has a very strong tradition of 'communitarism' where each citizen gives back to the community before asking the state or the government to help, in Germany you experience quite the opposite. Indeed, we have a very strong system which states "the state is going to fix it". Wherever there is a problem, a citizen will first assume that the responsibility lies at a government level and will not ask if he himself can help.

That also means that German media and experts and politicians often look over to the US and say, "well, they can do it with volunteers, why can't we?" and they forget that the US and Germany are not to be compared one on one in this topic.

So, yes, I would like to see a change here in Germany .

I'd like to see volunteering become a natural alternative for the people and for the institutions, but I also do definitely not want to let the state out of its responsibility. Full paid staff cannot be replaced by volunteers without a loss of quality because there will not be an equal replacement between the two (i.e., 1 full staff does not equal 1 volunteer, it will be more 1 full staff = 17 volunteers). It must be understood that volunteers in Germany have to be on top of and not instead of existing paid staff members.

Misha Kechaqmadze (Georgia)

In Georgia I observe that the level of development of volunteerism is directly linked to the level of development of civil society. The higher the latter gets, the higher the former gets too! I think all post-soviet counties have the same situation, as the totalitarian regime that once ruled in this part of the world had the same characteristics everywhere. Georgia finally is moving to establishing free and democratic society and I believe that volunteers, who generally are the most active members of society worldwide, will have a particularly importance in this process. There are several reasons that I believe this will work in Georgia , and they include emerging democratic institutions, active civil-minded young people and a huge amount of support from

international organizations. All these, combined with the desire of the Georgian population who now have a democratic country, will make this work.

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