Rising Reflections on the National Volunteering Conference

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Australia's new *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033* was launched in mid-February 2023 at the National Volunteering Conference on Ngunnawal Country in Canberra. Under the theme 'The Future is Now', the conference attracted 580 in-person delegates and 300 delegates who attended online to connect, reflect and reimagine the future of volunteering in Australia.

Over 2 days, the conference plenaries and break-out sessions explored a range of current and emerging research and practice topics such as informal volunteering; the importance of inclusion, diversity and intersectionality; the role of leadership and innovations and evolving understandings of volunteering. These important topics are recognised and embedded in the new strategy.

Following a participatory research and co-design process led by Volunteering Australia, the strategy has 3 focus areas and aims:

- **Individual potential and the volunteer experience:** volunteering is safe, inclusive, accessible, meaningful and not exploitative.
- **Community and social impact:** the diversity and impact of volunteering is articulated and celebrated.
- **Conditions for volunteering to thrive:** the right conditions are in place for volunteering to be effective and sustainable.[1]

These focus areas and aims are supported by 11 objectives that identify what needs to be achieved to meet the aims and address the challenges facing volunteering.

The new strategy comes at a critical juncture for volunteering in Australia. Approximately 27% of Australia's population formally volunteered in 2022. Volunteers contribute to the delivery of 'arts, sports, events, community building, social welfare, health, education, animal welfare, conservation, and emergency services'.[2]

Australia relies on services provided by volunteers and volunteering contributes to significant economic, social, cultural, environmental and personal benefits. Many of these benefits are intangible and cannot be quantified. The struggle to put quantitative measures on the benefits of volunteering means that volunteers are often undervalued, taken-for-granted or rendered invisible in research, practice and across society.

Volunteering is a fundamental component of resilient communities.[3] Concerningly, the numbers of people participating in formal volunteering have been declining for several decades. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to this decline, with numbers not returning to pre-pandemic levels. Several reasons have been identified as contributing to this decline, including:

- the financial costs and increasing time demands associated with volunteering
- the increasing regulations and bureaucracy associated with formal volunteering
- the changing social, cultural, and economic conditions that generate and/or perpetuate barriers to volunteering
- an over-reliance on volunteers for the delivery of essential services.

In the context of emergency management volunteers, these factors have also been identified in research related to the challenges of recruitment and retention.[4] The conference provided insightful discussion on the evolution of emergency volunteering in the context of climate change and the increasing frequency and severity

Left to right: John Richardson (AIDR), Liz Mackinlay CEO (Australian Business Volunteers), Mark Reilly (Disaster Relief Australia), Bradley Creevey (NEMA) at 2023 National Volunteering Conference.

Image: Volunteering Australia

of disasters. Facilitator, John Richardson from the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, asked the audience to consider how diverse forms of volunteering beyond the traditional emergency management sector contributes to community resilience before, during and after disasters. Seemingly disparate forms of volunteering, from community sport, environmental conservation, to supporting small businesses develop skills, all contribute to strengthening the resilience of individuals and communities prior to a disaster and supporting recovery after a disaster. We all therefore have a role in times of increasing crises and uncertainty.

The growth of informal volunteering

While formal volunteering numbers have been declining, the rates of informal volunteering have been growing. The strategy notes that 47% of Australia's population had volunteered informally in 2022.[5] Though its definition remains elusive, informal volunteering broadly refers to any volunteering done external to formal organisations. Informal volunteering has also been referred to as spontaneous, unaffiliated or emergent volunteering and mutual aid.

Informal volunteers are often first responders in emergencies and disasters and many remain active alongside the formal emergency management response and recovery phases.[6] During the conference interactive symposium on informal volunteering, the findings of the Motivating Volunteers Effectively (MoVE) project were presented. MoVE is a collaborative project between the universities of Sheffield, Hull and Leeds in the United Kingdom. The research examined how mutual aid groups operated to support their communities during the pandemic. The rise in (or greater awareness of) informal volunteering offers significant benefits and presents new opportunities. It can also create challenges for volunteering-dominant sectors, such as the emergency management sector.[7] Shared challenges mean

shared opportunities for learning and collaborating to co-design solutions.

The MoVE project identified 5 principles that enabled effective action of mutual aid groups:

· A hyperlocal footprint – working in small, well-defined areas.

· Relationally driven – focused on fostering relationships.

· Informal and flexible – informality allowed for rapid response to community needs.

· Horizontal decision-making - shared leadership and decision-making premised on respect, listening and shared purpose.

· Mutualism – groups were inclusive of anyone, emphasising reciprocity and lasting relationships.[8]

While not all of these principles may be readily applicable in all volunteering settings, it is a valuable exercise to consider and learn from alternative approaches.

The conference provided the opportunity to create connections, consider diverse and alternative viewpoints and reiterated the importance of sharing experiences and learning together regardless of the kinds of volunteering people are involved in. The new strategy sets the foundations by articulating the challenges facing volunteering in Australia and is an opportunity to imagine a better future.

Endnotes

1. Volunteering Australia 2023, *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033, p.7.*

2. Volunteering Australia 2023, *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033, p.18.*

3. UN Volunteers 2018, *State of the World's Volunteerism Report: The thread that binds volunteerism and community resilience.* At: https://www.unv.org/sites/default/files/UNV_SWVR_2018_English_WEB.pdf.

4. McLennan B, Dunlop P, Kragt D. Holtrop D, Gagné M, Luksyte A & Farid HM 2021, *Enabling sustainable emergency volunteering: final project report.* At: https://www.bnhcrc.com.au/sites/default/files/managed/downloads/enabling_sustainable_emergency_volunteering_final_project_report.pdf.

5. Volunteering Australia 2023, *National Strategy for Volunteering 2023-2033, p.19.*

6. Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience 2017, *Communities responding to disasters: planning for spontaneous volunteers.* At: https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/handbook-spontaneous-volunteers/.

7. McLennan B, Whittaker J, Kruger T & Handmer J 2021, *Navigating authority and legitimacy when 'outsider' volunteers co-produce emergency management services. Environmental Hazards, vol. 20, no. 1, pp.7–22.*

8. Thiery H, Cook J, Burchell J & McNeill J 2022, *Communities are doing it for themselves: lessons from the mutual aid experience.* At: https://doit.life/file/md/209757/communities-are-doing-it-for-themselve.