

Plenary I

Topic: Sustainable Volunteerism and A Sustainable Community



Volunteerism and Social Cohesion

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Abstract

Both volunteering and social cohesion depend on the individuals as the basic units of society who can be other-regarding even when they are self-interested at the same time. A window of opportunity of volunteering opens up one's eyes to the needs of others. The practice of volunteering promotes interactions beyond one's intimate, close circle, nurtures a habit to cooperate with strangers and eventually broadens and deepens social trust. Findings from a 2003 sample survey in Hong Kong confirm that participation in volunteering is positively related to prerequisites for social cohesion such as trust, empathy, cooperativeness, and participation in social group life. These relations are however subject to various kinds of modifications by education and religiosity in different contexts. This paper concludes that volunteerism provides meaningful support to sustainable harmony of a society and volunteer organizations such as AVS can, in the interest of social cohesion, promote more services dedicated to cross-cut social strata, occupational categories and socio-cultural divisions.

Introduction

Social cohesion (or harmony) has become a buzz word in recent years in Hong Kong. Both the central and the local governments hold it up as a precondition for political stability and economic prosperity. It is appealing to the mass public who are weary of political controversies. While social cohesion is a great communitarian ideal, it requires hard thinking if it is to be taken seriously. Today, I would like to explore the nature of social cohesion, the state of social cohesion in Hong Kong, and the possible contribution of volunteering to its advancement.

What is social cohesion?

Social cohesion can be understood as a state of frequent interactions among citizens from different sectors of society, that are characterized by shared values, norms and attitudes such as trust, spirit of cooperation and mutual help, and eagerness to take part in civic life.

In this sense, social cohesion does not mean the absence of differences in terms of interests, opinions, and social practices. At a minimum, social cohesion can be defined by the absence of social exclusions in education, employment, social occasions, and the public sphere and so on. To live up to the ideal, it calls for an appreciation and embrace of differences and diversities in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, language etc.

The outcome of social cohesion is measured not so much by political stability (e.g. number of street demonstration) and economic prosperity (e.g. GDP per capita) at the societal level, but more essentially at the individual level, i.e. whether and to what extent cohesion is experienced by everyone as a kind of the quality of social life.

The state of social cohesion in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has been fortunate for the absence of some deep-seated cleavages seen in other parts of the world, e.g. ethnic tension, linguistic division, religious conflict, class struggle, and cultural clash. While political ideology represents a boundary line that divides the people of Hong Kong, it is based on political experiences rather than belief in isms, less than six decades old, thus not deep-seated at all. After all, radical political ideology has no market in Hong Kong.

Despite all these positive signs, there is no room for complacency, because there are still structural factors that could threaten social harmony. Findings from many social

researches have attested to the low level of general trust among the people of Hong Kong. Without improvement on this front, the foundation of social cohesion remains shaky.

There are cleavages in Hong Kong. They include the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the division between the new immigrants and the established residents, the tension between the rights and democracy movement and the conservative defense, and social exclusions of certain sectors of the population like the Indians and Pakistanis. These contradictions require a resolution for social cohesion to be sustained.

Can volunteering contribute to social cohesion?

Conceptually speaking, volunteering is linked to certain civic orientations that are basic to sustainable social cohesion: spirit of empathy with other people in need, and readiness to make sacrifices (e.g. time, money) for others. Targets of volunteer service involve “strangers” or even “socially excluded persons”, social trust and tolerance are necessary attitudes for the service concerned to be meritorious. All these social psychological orientations are important pre-conditions for successful volunteerism and social cohesion.

Participation in organized volunteering promotes interactions beyond one’s intimate, close circle and thus nurtures behavioral habits conducive to social cohesion. Volunteering organized by government departments or civic associations provides volunteers a group life whereby they learn to work with other people who may think and behave differently. The initial, positive experience with group work stimulates further involvement in social groups of the same or different kinds. The more cross-cutting group lives, the more likely a society is cohesive.

To sum up, we can thus hypothesize that volunteering contributes positively to the development of social trust, social empathy, cooperativeness, and civic group life.

It is not easy to empirically verify these hypotheses, for the lack of established knowledge on the volunteerism-social cohesion linkage and the paucity of available data for Hong Kong. Fortunately, there is a recent local study on social cohesion.¹ This survey study contains a question on participation in volunteer activities. This single question enables us to explore, to some extent, our subject matter today. Below are the findings.

First, according to the survey, not too many people were volunteers in 2003. Only 20.4% out of 2798 interviewees responded that they had ever participated in volunteering activities in the past year. In terms of activeness, 79.6% of the Hong Kong people never

¹. The survey was conducted in August to October 2003 by Policy 21 Limited, The University of Hong Kong, with Prof. Joseph Chan as Dr. Elaine Chan as co-investigators. I am deeply grateful to them for the sharing of the dataset.

participated in volunteering, 7.7% volunteered once or twice a year, 3.5% did so three or four times a year, 2.6% five or six times a year, 3.3% monthly, and 3.1% weekly.

Secondly, volunteering is positively associated with general social trust. Social trust is measured by three survey statements and the respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement on a scale of 1 through 10, with 1 being “absolutely disagree” and 10 “absolutely agree”. These statements and the scores in terms of statistical means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1. The pattern of the volunteering-trust relationship is clear. No matter which survey statement is used, the result is the same: volunteers are more trustful of other people than non-volunteers.

Table 1 Volunteering and Social Trust
(Arithmetic means on 10-point scale, 1 = absolutely disagree & 10 = absolutely agree)
(Figures in brackets are standard deviations)

	Non-volunteer	Volunteer
“In HK, never easily trust other people” *	3.65 (2.37)	3.89 (2.35)
“HK people like taking advantage of others” *	4.95 (2.38)	5.11 (2.30)
“I tend to easily trust other people”	5.48 (2.46)	5.89 (2.44)

* The responses have been recoded in the reverse order such that higher numbers denote greater trust.

The association between volunteering and social empathy with others is shown in Table 2. Compared with non-volunteers, volunteers are more willing to pay more tax if increase in tax can increase social welfare. The same is true with reduction in salary in order to keep others on employment.

Table 2 Volunteering and Social Empathy
(Arithmetic means on 10-point scale, 1 = absolutely unwilling & 10 = absolutely willing)
(Figures in brackets are standard deviations)

	Non-volunteer	Volunteer
“If increase in tax can increase social welfare, I am willing to pay more tax”	5.54 (2.68)	5.96 (2.51)
“I would rather cut my salary and not want other colleagues lose their jobs”	6.42 (2.57)	6.74 (2.45)

The picture of cooperativeness is more or less the same, though with a twist. Let me elaborate. The survey asked a question as follows: If your colleague(s) has (have) one of the following backgrounds, are you willing to cooperate with him/her? The response scale runs from 1 being extremely unwilling to 10 for extremely willing. The four backgrounds refer to people with different political views, homosexuals, new immigrants, and Indians or Pakistanis. The latter three categories of people are, to a varying extent, treated as “socially excluded persons” in Hong Kong. From the findings as reported in Table 3, we can see that except for the case of new immigrants, volunteers are more cooperative than non-volunteers. The difference with respect to homosexuals is particularly glaring, indicating that attitudes toward the homosexuals are more divided than the other three categories of persons.

Table 3 Volunteering and Cooperativeness
(Arithmetic means on 10-point scale, 1 = absolutely unwilling & 10 = absolutely willing)
(Figures in brackets are standard deviations)

	Non-volunteer	Volunteer
Colleagues with different political view	5.58 (2.59)	5.72 (2.43)
Homosexuals	5.26 (2.86)	6.06 (2.73)
New immigrants from the Mainland	6.72 (2.22)	6.66 (2.13)
Indians or Pakistanis	5.40 (2.68)	5.55 (2.44)

I have alluded to the plausible contribution of volunteering to social life. Table 4 provides support to that claim. It is based on a question about membership and frequency of participation in activities in social groups or associations. The scale of measurement uses 0 for non-membership, 1 for annual participation through 7 being participation on a weekly basis. The results confirm a positive relationship between volunteering and civic group life. Specifically, volunteers are invariably more active in activities organized by those groups they belong to, as compared to non-volunteers. This is particularly true with regard to church/religious groups, to be followed by social service groups and educational (e.g. parents) associations.

Table 4 Volunteering and Social Participation
(Arithmetic means on 7-point scale, 0 = never participated & 7 = weekly participation)
(Figures in brackets are standard deviations)

	Non-volunteer	Volunteer
Neighborhood	0.21 (0.81)	0.52 (1.36)
Occupational associations	0.15 (0.61)	0.43 (1.23)
Church/Religious groups	0.39 (1.38)	2.17 (2.76)
Educational associations	0.41 (1.04)	0.82 (1.55)
Recreational	0.16 (0.82)	0.52 (1.43)

Social service	0.07 (0.55)	0.98 (1.94)
Advocacy/Pressure groups	0.02 (2.71)	0.14 (0.72)

A caution is in order. I have not proven that volunteering contributes positively to the development of social trust, social empathy, cooperativeness, and civic group life. The above statistical analyses pertain to the test of association only, not causality. A critic may well challenge that pre-existing social trust prompts one to volunteer or that one has acquired a sense of empathy before she becomes a volunteer. It is plausible to image a two-way reciprocal relationship between volunteering and the orientations as background conditions for social cohesion. Finally, it is also conceivable that there are factors common to both volunteering and the social-psychological prerequisites for social cohesion. Religion or religiosity, for instance, may lead to social empathy as well as to readiness to volunteer. This implies that even if we submit that conceptually volunteering should lead to greater social cohesion via those orientations, there is still a need to control for other plausible explanations in any empirical study. I now want to address just that.

The findings about the degree of cooperativeness with homosexual colleagues and the extraordinary activeness in religious group life suggest that religiosity may well be an alternative explanation other than volunteering for social cohesion. This is partially borne out by Table 5. In this table, causal models based on regression analyses demonstrate the independent and relative contribution of the three factors, i.e. volunteering, education and religiosity to the dependent variable cooperativeness with “socially excluded persons”. The most important finding to note is that once education and religiosity are introduced in the causal models, the effect of volunteering on cooperativeness disappears in the cases of new immigrants and Indians/Pakistanis, is strengthened in the case of colleagues with different political views, but diluted in the case of homosexuals. In other words, volunteering is a complicated factor of influence on social cohesion depending on the particular contexts.

With regard to the impact of religiosity as an alternative explanation for social cohesion, it is found that the more religious one is the less cooperative with homosexual colleagues. However, the relationship is reverse when it comes to cooperation with colleagues who hold different political views, who are new immigrants from the Mainland, or who are Indians or Pakistanis.

The level of educational achievement turns out to be an alternative explanation too. It even has greater influence as compared to religiosity for cooperation with colleagues who hold different political views, who are homosexuals, or who are Indians or Pakistanis.

Table 5 Willingness to cooperate with colleagues with certain backgrounds

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
A: colleagues with different political views			

Volunteering	.079**	.041	.093*
Education		.131***	.176**
Religiosity			.105*
Cumulative R ²	.055	.095	.187
B: colleagues who are homosexuals			
Volunteering	.171***	.067*	.169**
Education		.275***	.241***
Religiosity			-.092*
Cumulative R ²	.108	.277	0.235
C: colleagues who are new immigrants from the Mainland			
Volunteering	-.021*	-.043	.011
Education		.078**	.056
Religiosity			.214***
Cumulative R ²	.017	.057	.216
D: colleagues of Indian or Pakistani origin			
Volunteering	.066*	.012	-.007
Education		.193***	.230***
Religiosity			.135***
Cumulative R ²	.046	.120	.178

* denotes $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

What have transpired so far? To begin with, we can establish that volunteering is definitely related positively to background conditions for social cohesion, although we do not know exactly how. Secondly and to strike a cautious note, causality between volunteering and those conditions can not be conclusively proven. Thirdly, even when causal analyses are attempted, the effect of volunteering seems complicated as it varies from case to case. This leads to the admission that we can know only little about the precise role of volunteering on social harmony and further, more rigorous research is thus warranted.

Conclusion

What are the implications of the above findings for organizations of volunteer services in Hong Kong?

Organizations such as Agency for Volunteer Service are key players in the community and major social intermediaries between the government and citizens. To the extent that volunteering contributes to the enhancement of social cohesion, Agency for Volunteer Service has grave responsibilities of promoting the cohesion of our society. The present empirical study suggests the desirability of allocating high priority to those kinds of volunteer services that promote trust-building, social empathy, the cooperative spirit and participation in civic group life. In particular, there is a critical need for volunteer services to cross-cut social strata, occupational categories and socio-cultural divisions in terms of both the givers and the recipients. In view of the interaction effect

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between education and volunteering, bringing home the message of volunteerism to schools is also pivotal in the project of social cohesion enhancement.

I wish, by way of the final conclusion, that AVS will be well remembered for its contribution to sustainable social cohesion in Hong Kong in the decades to come.