Workshop Presentation

Topic: Social Capital and Volunteering

Sustainable Volunteering through Community Capacity Building: An Institutionalist Perspective

Mr. Clive Ka Lun LEE
Younger Members Committee, The Hong Kong Institution of Engineers
kllee@clp.com.hk

Abstract
This paper develops a theoretical modelling of sustainable volunteering in the contemporary context. The study will begin with revisiting some of the theoretical underpinnings of volunteering. This will be following by the modelling of sustainable volunteering at the community level suggesting that sustainable volunteering as about the capacity to thicken philanthropic exchange relationship through institutionalisation that can galvanise the interaction between human, social and cultural capital existing at community level. It identifies the factors that affect the degree to which sustainable volunteering can be achieved.

This paper attempts to offer an institutional perspective of how the goal of sustainable volunteering can be reached at macro-level. Volunteering has become a global phenomena and 'volunteering and active participation in voluntary associations are considered to be key components of civil society.'[1] The value of volunteering lies in the fact that volunteering 'generate[s] social cohesion and societal self-regulation as well as strengthening political democracy by developing individual citizenship and organizing countervailing powers.'[2] In understanding what volunteering is and what constitutes sustainable volunteering, the what, where, who and why of volunteering is extremely of importance as it attempts to highlight the intrinsic and the instrumental values of volunteering to society.[3] While there has been growing number of researches on volunteering, there has been lacked an integrated theory towards sustaining the momentum of volunteering. This paper attempts to fill this research gap by proffering new conceptual understanding of what volunteering is about and by developing the preliminary model of 'sustainable volunteering.'

What is Volunteering?

At the most general level, '[v]olunteering means any activities in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, organization.'[4] This definition, however, does not define precisely the threshold in which volunteering stands out as a distinctive type of activities and the normative basis embedded therein. Four premises about volunteering were offered by Wilson and Musick which enable us to further delineate volunteering from other activities. Firstly, '[v]olunteer work is a productive activity.'[5] Instead of being measured in terms of monetary value, the productivity of volunteering is assessed by its contribution to maintain to the well-being of society which can not be made in conventional market. The second premise is that about that 'volunteer work involves collective action.'[6] As argued, 'as a cultural and economic

phenomenon, volunteering is part of the way societies are organized, how they allocate social responsibilities, and how much engagement and participation they expect from citizens.'[7] The collectiveness in relation to society is built into the normative basis for volunteering and this also brings up the third premise. The relational architecture between volunteer-recipient from volunteering perspective is structured to be ethical one.[8] While it is out of the scope of this paper to determine how ethical volunteering is to be, what can be spoken of is that volunteering involves non-material dimension of society and the major source for volunteering is altruistic. Indeed, '[v]olunteering is a special kind of exchange relationship, one in which an immediate reward is not expected, since the other party to the exchange is most likely unable to discharge the obligation at the time of the exchange. By volunteering we create integrative social forces by obligating people to each other.'[9] The final premise about volunteering stresses the complementary nature of different volunteering works which recognises the symbolic relationship of different social activities.

In short, volunteering, so defined, can be construed of as the normative activities that work towards solving social collective problem thereby enhancing society resilience. The definition has to however be read together with four essential attributes of volunteerism that are relevant to organisational configuration. As has been argued, '[v]olunteerism can be defined as long-term, planned, prosocial behaviors that benefit strangers and occur within an organizational setting. Based on this definition, volunteerism has four salient attributes: longevity, planfulness, nonobligatory helping, and an organizational context'[10]

- Longevity: 'Volunteering is usually a relatively long-term behaviour.'[11]
- Planfulness: 'Volunteering is typically a thoughtful and planned action.'[12]
- Nonobligatory helping: 'Because the recipients of a volunteer's beneficence are either strangers or an organization that serves these individuals, the volunteer is not motivated by a sense of personal obligation to a particular person.'[13]
- Organizational context: 'volunteering is far more likely than other kinds of helping to take place within an organizational setting.'[14]

While Penner's definition attempts to define volunteering in relation to the instrumental dimension, volunteering cannot be successful devoid of normative currency that has to be unleashed hand in hand with developing organisational capacity.

Indeed, combining the normative-societal dimension and organisation dimension of volunteering gives us an alternative understanding about volunteering that can inform policy makers and academia of how volunteering can be understood at *structural* level. Essentially, volunteering is about the synergistic combination of strategic, organisational/tactical and normative dimensions.

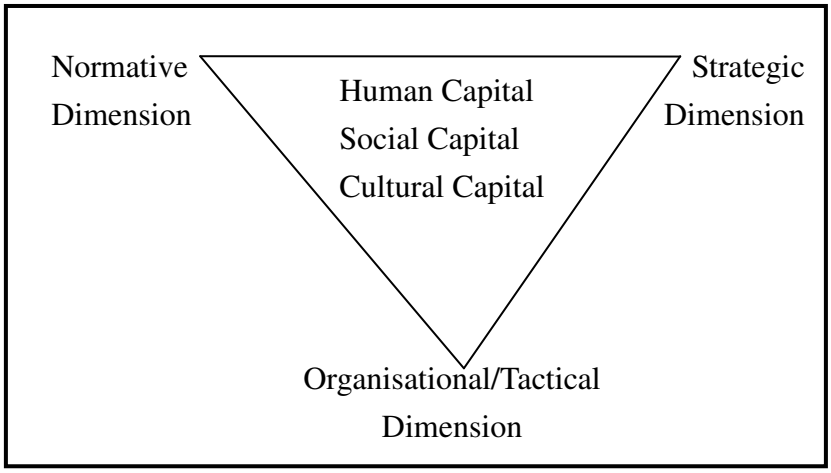
Strategic: The development of strategic vision about volunteering that can guide long-term development about how society can produce desirable outcomes.
Organisational/Tactical: The organising of societal and organisational resources working towards volunteering through networking, collaboration and administrative arrangements.

Normative: The generation of and the negotiation of normative value that the stakeholders that are engaged in or affected by volunteering agree upon thus providing a mission value of the volunteering enterprise.

Having defined the parameters for volunteering in a societal context, resources of volunteering have to be identified. The major ones are, as identified by Wilson and Musick, human capital, social capital and cultural capital. As a matter of fact, all these resources have been 'housed' at community level.

- Volunteering as 'productive work that requires human capital;'
- Volunteering as 'collective behaviour that requires social capital;'
- Volunteering as 'ethnically guided work that requires cultural capital.'[15]

The resources and the dimensions that have been identified interact determining the vigorous of volunteering and the degree to which volunteering works match the societal aspiration. Sustaining the resilience of volunteering demands the organisation involved to institutionalise the interaction in such a way that these capitals can be enriched and coordinated within the context the boundary of which is defined by the interaction of these three dimensions.



Towards Sustainable Volunteering: An Institutional Perspective

Drawing from various literatures, I will begin by proposing a definition of sustainable volunteering and a framework for mapping relations among its constituents and understanding the logic for the interaction.

As starting point, I define sustainable volunteering as about the capacity to thicken philanthropic exchange relationship through institutionalisation that can galvanise the interaction between human, social and cultural capital existing at community level. The process of this institutionalisation has to operate at strategic, tactical and normative levels in order to secure the success of the final outcome. The outcome of sustainable volunteering should be the one which is inclusive of different stakeholders that can enrich the community input to the volunteering enterprise, and which has holistic vision and strategy that can be translated into action plan which harnesses the

distinctive potentials endowed in individual contributors and get organised on a collaborative basis. From an institutionalist perspective, sustainable volunteering involves establishing strategic mechanism, be it an organisation or an agreed routine, that can empower individual, locate and coordinate the organisational resources on one hand and highlight the normative basis for volunteering which forms the rules and routines of individual behaviour and engages them in the process of designing the forms of collaboration.

The detail of how this institutional perspective offers understanding of sustainable volunteering is to be developed. Based on the proposition advanced by North, the assumption of this perspective rests on the nature of institutions as 'structure incentives in human exchanges,'[16] as a means to 'reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday life' and 'as a guide to human interaction.'[17] Institutions 'are the framework within which human interaction takes place.'[18] The central focus of this perspective is organised around the notion of community capacity which is the interaction of different community capital that 'can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community'[19] through developing a parameter within which structural coherence for volunteering can be developed. By structural coherence for volunteering, I mean how the interaction within the three capitals and between capitals and the volunteering context defined by the aforementioned dimensions in a way that makes these the whole enterprise self-sustaining.

Obviously, the reason why community is of importance is that the direct interface between volunteers, voluntary organisations, and recipients and such crucial source as human power for voluntary service is loaded at community. Indeed, as has been argued, '[v]oluntary work may well be the ideal medium for binding together a modern society in which traditional integrating frameworks have disappeared and people enter into relationships on the basis of common interests and shared aims.'[20] In a way, whilst the success of volunteering is predicated upon the availability of social resource at community, the value of community such as community cohesion is underlined by having a degree of reciprocity revealed by volunteering.

Figure 1 demonstrates the relationship between different components located at macro and micro levels and their interaction in order to further explain the dynamics of sustainable volunteering. This scope of this paper focuses more on the macro-level and how it affects micro-level.

As noted, the community capacity pertinent to volunteering comprises three main capitals namely human capital, social capital, and cultural capital and the interaction. They reflect the underlying configuration of society and these capitals as such are by their very nature not monolithic. The aim of developing sustainable volunteering is to direct these capitals towards volunteering through empowerment.

Factors Determining Community Capacity in Relation to Sustainable Volunteering

The degree of empowerment through leadership and organisational development and

inclusive arrangement[21]

The need for empowerment stems from the fact that '[v]olunteers can play significant roles in complex jobs but not without the appropriate skills.'[22] Volunteers themselves may be endowed with certain kind of technical know-how is one thing; how to utilise their voluntary power in the specific context is another. Empowerment strategy aims to develop the capacity to translate the individual skills into volunteering assets. Bear in mind should be the working assumption which notes that voluntary sector is not derivative of public or private sector; instead it establishes itself a kind of independent personality that provide a distinctive presence in society.[23] This also calls for quality management of the institution of volunteering that has been the core features shared in both private and public sectors.[24] To this end, cultivating leadership that can develop and maintain the vitality of volunteering mission, whatever it may be, deems to be

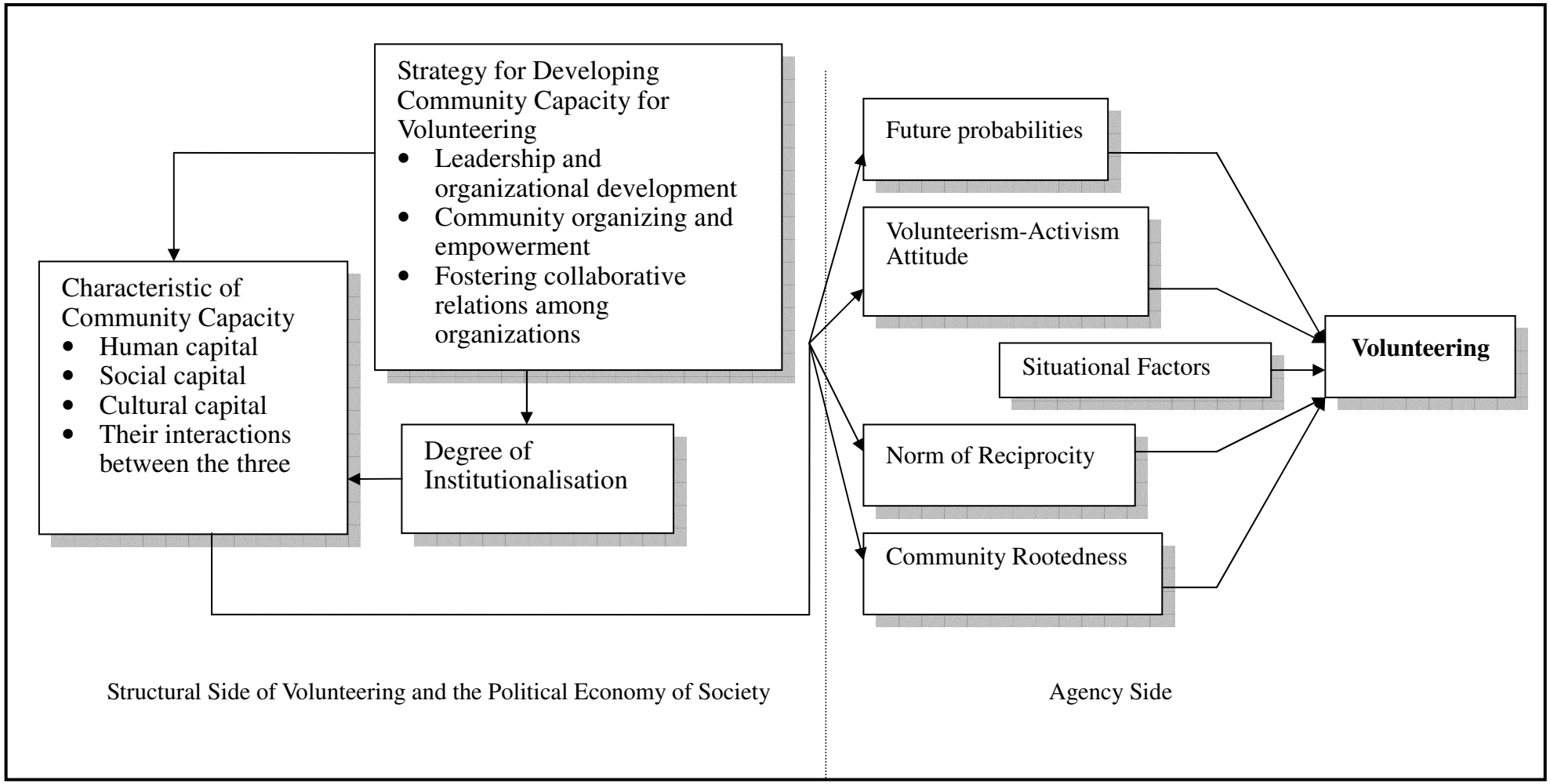


Figure 1: The Conceptual Modelling of Sustainable Volunteering (Source: Synthesised from Charskin *et al*., 2001; Schanning, 1999; Wilson and Musick, 1997; Van Til, 1987)

imperative in identifying how do the volunteering enterprise establishes its strategic direction.

Indeed there is a tendency in using entrepreneurial means for managing volunteering:

> organizations that utilize volunteers are beginning to realize that many staff issues, such as pay, working conditions, and training, also apply to volunteers who play critical roles or make major time commitments. In the past, whether volunteers personally benefited from the experience was not considered; today, if volunteers are expected to be dependable and dedicate more of their time, programs need to think about the personal benefits their unpaid workforce receives.[25]

In the view of the evolving context of volunteering and its growing demand for the quality of volunteering, organisations concerned should develop its capacity that can think beyond the need for recipients to develop a holistic view of volunteering about organising human capital.[26]

The scope of partnership that has been involved and the relevance of parties involved in the volunteering enterprise[27]

'Volunteering in all three sectors may contribute to the reduction of tensions and competition among and between the sectors.'[28] Institution forms a mediating structure between business corporation, the state, as well as the voluntary sector.[29] Institution, be it in the form of organisation or of the negotiated routine, forms an interface between these three by retaining the collective memories and knowledge of volunteering thus conducive to the development of partnership for the purpose of volunteering. Individuals, who are living in this institution, and 'with the roles in more than one sector, paid or unpaid, bring information about one sector into the other. This help to defuse or belie the most common, often inaccurate "myth" each sector may hold about the other.'[30] 'Specifying the conditions under which the various patterns [about partnership] occur and the processes through which they come about' is important but this exercise should be 'historically and perhaps locally specific and embedded in socio-political-economic-cultural context and ongoing dynamics of change.'[31] In short, '[s]ocial and political structures do seem to affect the likelihood that volunteering will occur and that it will take a particular form.'[32] At the end, embedded with strong and credible institution, partnership involving appropriate stakeholders provides a strong backdrop against which multi-sectoral voluntary services can be delivered more effectively. The final outcome of developing tactical partnership is the strengthening of social capital which 'describes resources, such as information, trust, and cooperative labor, acquired and mobilized through social connections.'[33]

The acceptance of norms for volunteering through collaborative learning

The learning of the value of norms is most effective it is on the arena that is rich in terms of perceived benefits of volunteering. By rich, it not only enables potential volunteering to appreciate the importance of collectiveness in society but also

'enables' to individual to realise the self thus consolidating their commitment.[34] Indeed, '[v]olunteering is motivated by some combination of self-interest and of concern for the well-being of others.'[35] The task of institutionalisation is to reconfigure the norm of volunteering from solely an enterprise about altruism to one that emphasises altruism associated with personal growth.[36] The connection of self *vis-à-vis* volunteering is thus enriched. To this end, institutionalisation engages in promoting international best practices about the benefits of collaborating with one another and how this collaboration can allow individual to acquire skills on one hand and to receive services on the other. The rewarding of responsibility through enabling personal growth deepens the root of volunteering by motivating individual to contribute. The invisible benefits of volunteering that have been aggregated throughout time span becomes the collective benefit of society thus in turn acknowledging the volunteers' contribution themselves. Given such new model of volunteering characterised by 'a strong activity orientation, short-term commitment, extensive turnover and a weak or contained value basis,'[37] norms and institution can no longer be superimposed from the top but has to be developed through the reflexivity of volunteer that can be accumulated in different involvements and to be shared with others.

These three factors can be understood to become the prescriptive guidelines for guiding community policy towards volunteering. Yet, an important note is that empowering community capacity towards the structural coherence as mentioned previously requires a holistic treatment of these three factors and explore the complementary nature of these capitals in realising sustainable volunteering. Community must in turn provide structure that allows dialogue and participation in developing their own agenda about how this goal can be reached.

From Macro-Level to Micro-Level

Owing to the limited space and the scope of this paper, I shall not go into detail into the dynamics of this translation. Instead, I will highlight some preliminary (pre-)theoretical observations.

- The empowerment of volunteers increases their probabilities to volunteering as they can participate in a wider range of activities;
- The increasing network and partnership increases the probabilities for potential volunteers to involve in full or partial capacity, thus facilitating the development of attachment to volunteering;
- The 'enabling' of self in the community and the realisation of 'self-interest' lays the basis for reciprocity between volunteering and volunteer;
- The institutionalised process of involvement establishes a stable basis for participation and vision mapping. This stability becomes a source for developing community rootedness as their engagement will be organised in such a way that their contributions are to be identified and confirmed.

Conclusion

To conclude, the main thesis of the paper is that being 'social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience,'[38] institution can from a theoretical point of view strengthen the community capacity in relation to volunteering. The latter becomes one

of the most important sources to arrive at sustainable volunteering. This paper has also developed a theoretical modelling that conceptualises sustainable volunteering that outlines the interaction of different conceptual elements that are embedded in volunteering exercise. The value of the conceptualisation of sustainable volunteering extends beyond theoretical ground and serves to provide a ground for debating how this goal can be realised with reference to the local situation.

Endnotes

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[18] *Ibid*, p. 4.
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[21] Margaret Gooch, "Volunteering in Catchment Management Groups: Empowering the Volunteer," *Australian Geography*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2004), p. 198.
[22] Jean Baldwin Grossman and Kathryn Furano, "Making the Most of Volunteers," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2000), p. 202.
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