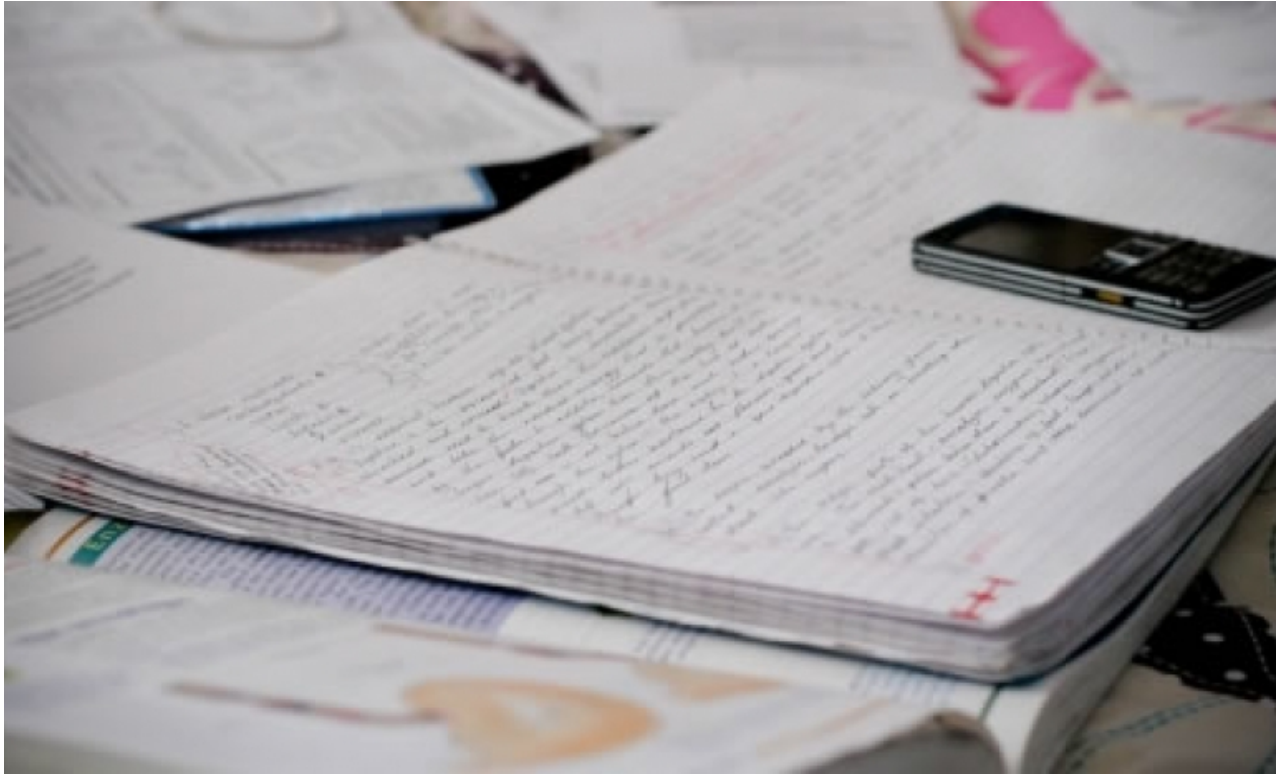


How good is the UK at volunteering?



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This International Volunteer Day I find myself reflecting on the state of volunteering in the UK.

Gethyn Williams

Submitted by F Pere Tarrés on Mon, 11/13/2017 - 10:58

Description:

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Vertical photo:



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"In this country," I regularly and confidently declare to friends and colleagues, "we do volunteering really well. Compared to other countries, our rates of volunteering are high. Our politics may be a mess, but as a nation our commitment to volunteering is something we should be really proud of."

I feel great when I say this. The only problem is I don't know if it is true. I think it is. I'm sure I've heard it said ~~horizontal photo~~ someone with sufficient authority. And in a post-truth world, where facts are considered optional, perhaps that's enough?

For conversation maybe, but not here. So just how do our rates of volunteering compare? As it turns out, this is tricky to answer. The data doesn't easily scan for comparison, and there are different measures to consider that produce varying results ([the time spent volunteering](#), [the frequency of volunteering](#), [volunteering as one expression of 'giving'](#)).

But the headline is that the UK isn't really that great after all. In fact, we are probably a lot more average than I have been leading people to believe. As we prepare to leave the European Union and go our own way in the world, perhaps UK volunteering isn't quite the global-leading export I had imagined.

Don't believe everything you read

Except dear reader, statistics may be misleading! You see, in the course of my research I realised other European nations may not be playing the game fairly. Germany and France, for example, have state-funded full-time youth social action programmes (national service schemes) which may be artificially inflating their results! An ingenious plan, no doubt devised by Michel Barnier to make the UK look lazy.

But if this is true then the joke is really on our European friends. Because to survive in a competitive global market we know a product cannot be artificially supported by the state, which is why successive UK governments have skilfully avoided the traps of making available adequate funding for volunteering, or [legislating to support its growth](#). Our volunteering is pure, it has integrity, and it is all the stronger for it!

The Party's Over?

So far then, so good. But before we hang out too much bunting we need to ask ourselves is how long this utopia can be sustained? You see, in recent years our free-market approach to volunteering has been under attack from within. And cracks are starting to show.

To understand this fully we need to go back to 2010, when the UK was still basking in the afterglow of the 2008 financial crash (lest we forget, the most successful market correction in modern history). A bold new progressive Coalition Government was ushered into power and they lost no time [introducing some significant changes over at our Office of National Statistics](#). Specifically, these misguided snowflakes started measuring our national 'wellbeing', asking themselves 'what is it that really makes us happy?'

You can imagine what came next. This one policy change [ballooned into a whole wellbeing industry](#). Perhaps economic strength, measured through Gross Domestic Product alone, shouldn't be the sole arbiter of our nation's success?

Inevitably, it wasn't long before such hippie thinking began to infect the world of volunteering. Even the [Chief Economist at the Bank of England](#) wasn't immune. Some even tried to [quantify volunteering wellbeing in cold hard financial terms](#). Talk about taking the fight right to the enemy's door!

It seemed the tide had turned and that the free-market was firmly in retreat, but in their giddy success the wellbeing-freaks had neglected one vital aspect of their plan, that for all the wellbeing in the world, volunteering still costs money to deliver. It needs a viable business model. Someone, somewhere still has to pay. The market alone understands this and, accessorised by our political masters, is [still notching up significant victories](#).

A unique asset

So for those of us that work in volunteering, this is our world: we have an incredible product generating huge non-financial returns but still needing a modest cash input that can be back-breakingly difficult to secure. Periodically we achieve symbolic, rhetoric victories ("Volunteers are the backbone of sport in this country!" "Without Carers our health and social care services would simply collapse!") but largely the market remains unmoved.

This is because in volunteering we have a unique asset, with a triple bottom line when it comes to capturing value:

- volunteers as our project inputs (their efforts help us serve our beneficiaries);
- volunteers as beneficiaries in their own right (deriving social and wellbeing benefits from their roles); and

volunteers as ambassadors, exercising tangible influence in the market thanks to their unique emotional power - how they describe us to their friends and peers can make or break our reputation or fundraising efforts.

?The rise of the sharing economy

So this #IVD I have two conclusions for everyone involved in making volunteering happen.

The first is that we need to keep articulating the value of volunteering. We're not the only product struggling to find

a viable business model in this, the end-game of free-market capitalism.

Non-financial markets are emerging everywhere. Some call it the 'Sharing Economy', fuelled by tech developments that allow anyone to monetise a previously fixed asset. Uber and AirBnB are your off the shelf examples, but Paul Mason's *Post Capitalism* maps 70 initiatives in the real sharing economy in Greece alone, in response to social and economic breakdown: time shares, food banks, energy co-ops. All non-monetary forms of exchange, solutions the market is unable to provide.

"Eventually," [Mason writes](#), "work becomes voluntary, basic commodities and public services are free, and economic management becomes primarily an issue of energy and resources, not capital and labour."

We will see more of this in the years to come, and when we do our expertise in volunteering – the ultimate non-financial good - will make us well-placed to capitalise.

And the second is that international comparisons can be, as we Brits would say, a bit of a red-herring (a false indicator). You can't trade the value of volunteering on international markets for the best returns - all value here is local, and that's a useful reminder for us when trying to attract investment. When looking for buyers, let's focus on *who most benefits*, rather than who we think *should* be paying.

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