



9:00 – 11:00 State of volunteering in Thailand and international experience of national volunteering promotion

Katie Turner; speaking points

Thank you so much to VSN and everyone involved in organising this conference for inviting me to speak to you on this topic. I feel particularly humbled doing so to an audience such as this one with so much knowledge and experience of volunteerism in the room. It also feels very apt to be asked to speak about volunteering in the UK context today as some of you may be aware that it is a significant day in the UK. UK citizens yesterday voted on which political party they want to govern the country for the next five years and volunteering has been one of many hot topics featuring in each of the party manifestos. And just in case you were wondering, don't worry, I submitted my postal vote for the election over the weekend so it's fine for me to be stood here talking to you!

As I was thinking about this presentation, it was difficult to know just how far back to go in volunteering history as the UK has a long standing tradition of formalised volunteering. I thought I'd therefore start way back in the mid 1700s! This is arguably when the first forms of what we now tend to refer to as 'formal' or organised volunteering – that is volunteering attached to specific organisation or cause – and charitable giving began to emerge. It had become fashionable for wealthy upper class to give money or volunteer their time to help the poor and some of the first charitable and volunteer recruitment organisations were set up. But it also sparked the beginning of debates that continue today between those who championed state intervention and those who believed that private charities should provide welfare.

Fast forward to after the 1st World War when these debates came to the fore again, as a comprehensive welfare state began to emerge with the UK Government taking a much greater responsibility for the protection and promotion of its citizens' economic and social well-being. Much of what had previously been presumed to of been provided through



volunteering and charity was now provided by the state. Instead greater emphasis was placed on the role of volunteering as an important component of a healthy democracy and recognition that it also provided services outside of those that fell within the provision of the state.

However, by the 1960s a number of things were going on that led to yet another shift in the way volunteering was perceived and organised. By this point there was increasing disillusionment with public services in terms of what they could and couldn't deliver which led to a rise in the number of voluntary organisations and volunteers forming in response to this gap. It was at this point that the volunteer sector began to become more formalised and the first local 'volunteer bureaux' or volunteer centres were established. The aim of these volunteer centres was to foster and develop volunteerism in the community and help build capacity for effective local volunteering. They also provide local leadership on issues relating to volunteerism and link potential volunteers with volunteer involving organisations which is still the function that they perform to this day. The setting up of these volunteer centres marked a move to transition from seeing volunteering as a social service and charity to viewing it as community action and a way of mobilising communities to take ownership over change within their communities.

In 1973 a national Volunteer Centre was then set up to support the development of a national infrastructure that would help voluntary bodies to operate more effectively. This was also an attempt to counter tensions that had emerged in the health and social services around the increased involvement of volunteers in the delivery of these services. This was perhaps exacerbated at the time by the fact that the government in power appeared to be viewing volunteering as a cheaper alternative to state provision that would serve a dual purpose of encouraging civic engagement and plugging gaps in service provision which they saw to be outside of the responsibilities of the state.



As I mentioned earlier on, volunteering has always been a hot topic amongst political parties and the rhetoric of the different political parties in relation to volunteering has arguably not moved forward all that much over the years. Still today volunteering is viewed by some political parties as a means to ensuring citizens take responsibility for their community and the delivery of local services, whilst other political parties are clear that volunteering is not a replacement for state services but provides a means for people to more actively engage in their community and in strengthening existing state provisions. Volunteering has at times also been used as a political tool. For example, as a culture of strike action – where whole sectors or companies of employees would refuse to go into work in demand for better pay and conditions - evolved in the UK volunteers began to be called upon by governments to step into the breach and act as strike breakers, coming in to temporarily cover the work of paid employees. However, despite these political differences and the sometimes negative association between volunteering and politics, volunteering remains deeply embedded within the UK's social policy agenda and is often a key element of strategies to promote social participation and increase individual and collective citizenship, especially among young people. As such, youth volunteering has gained prominence as a policy mechanism for addressing concerns about young people's individual and collective citizenship.

In terms of volunteering infrastructure in the UK today, political power for making decisions about volunteer policy is devolved with England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales responsible for their own policies. However, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the new national development agency for volunteering and the voluntary sector, that still has a national remit to champion volunteering and the voluntary sector, strengthen voluntary organisations and growing and enhance volunteering wherever it takes place. The UK government has also made its own direct investments in volunteering in recent years. In 2011 it launched the National Citizen Service programme, a programme for all 16-17yr old UK citizens which gives them the opportunity to take part in a series of team building and skills development activities over a course of a few weeks or a few days and then asks them to design and implement a one week volunteering project in their



community. In 2013 30,000 young people took part in the scheme and the scheme received almost half of the Office for Civil Society's total budget. The Government is also behind the funding for the UK International Citizenship Service (ICS) programme which partially funds UK young people between 18-25yrs to volunteer in projects overseas. This is where organisations like my own, VSO, get involved in the UK volunteering sector as we recruit and place these youth volunteers within our development programmes, supporting them to take on roles such as peer to peer youth mentors and community mobilisers, working alongside local youth groups and national volunteers in those countries.

To give you a brief snapshot of volunteering in the UK today. I'll start with a few statistics:

- The UK has one of the highest rates of volunteering in the world
- The Office for National Statistics recently estimated the annual economic value of regular formal volunteering to be £23.9 billion
- In 2013 over 14 million people in the UK volunteered
- Around a 24% to 33% of people in each age range report volunteering at least once a month (with those aged 65-74 the most likely to volunteer this frequently)

In terms of the most popular sectors for formal volunteers, these include:

- Sport /exercise (53%)
- Hobbies, recreation/arts/ social clubs (42%)
- Religion (36%)
- Children's education/schools (34%)
- Youth children's activities (outside school) (32%)
- Health, disability and social welfare (25%)
- Local community or neighbourhood groups (24%)
- The environment, animals (20%)

Some of the most popular volunteering activities are:

- Organising or helping to run an event (55%)



- Raising or handling money/ taking part in sponsored events (52%)
- Leading the group / member of committee (37%)
- Providing transport / driving (26%)
- Giving information / advice/counselling (24%)
- Visiting people (24%)
- Secretarial, clerical or admin work (23%)
- Befriending or mentoring people (21%)

Now I just wanted to end on a brief example that hopefully captures an aspect of the UK volunteering context today but draws a slight parallel with some of the discussions I participated in yesterday. Listening to how many of the volunteer movements in Thailand, Japan and the Philippines has evolved; they have often been prompted as a result of a natural disaster that has stirred a very personal reaction in people to want to help through volunteering. Now I don't want to pretend that in the UK we suffer from natural disasters that are anywhere near on the kind of scale experienced in these countries, but on a much smaller scale we have still been victims of climate change in recent years with a rise in the frequency of severe flooding in parts of the UK which has sometimes resulted in people having to leave their homes and put them at risk of injury or drowning in some cases. The work of volunteers has been a significant part of the response to the flooding. Helping people to salvage their belongings from their homes, providing temporary accommodation, participating in clean-up events, supporting rescue missions and providing interim medical care; without the support of volunteers, what was already a major operation could have turned into a much wider scale, far more drawn out disaster. It also prompted new innovations to help with the management of volunteers including a Facebook appeal which used geo-targeted messaging to send messages about flood warnings and requests for volunteers to people living in the areas that were most badly affected. This led to a website called Flood Volunteers being set up that people can use to sign up to volunteer or find out where the nearest volunteers are in their area that can help. At the same time organisations like The British Red Cross and the British Army in some cases were involved and could



supplement this volunteering activity with support from volunteers trained in medical assistance and relief work. What this example highlights to me is how in the UK, like Thailand and other countries, the volunteer spirit and communities' will to want to get involved and help during a crisis is still very much alive. It is also an example of how, despite having a strong and vibrant volunteer sector within the UK, there is always room to innovate and find new ways to mobilise and manage volunteer efforts.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to another day of lively discussion!