

POSITION PAPER

VOLUNTEERISM

What is volunteerism all about? What is the connection between volunteerism, associational life and participation in democracy? How can you promote voluntary engagement and influence in an organization? If you are asking yourself these questions, this paper is for you. It presents DUFs considerations on volunteerism – as well as lessons learnt, ideas and tools for understanding and working with volunteers in your organizations

WHY WORK WITH VOLUNTEERISM?

DUF works to promote young peoples' participation and influence in civil society organizations as well as their democratic engagement in society. Young peoples' voluntary work and engagement in a cause is an important element of active participation in organizational life and in broader society. That's why DUF asks you to work with volunteerism in your partnership and project.

Volunteering happens in many different ways – it depends on the organization and society you are part of. In DUFs experience meaningful volunteering work is based on a sense of social responsibility, willingness to contribute, enthusiasm for a cause, a feeling of community– and because it is fun.

When young volunteers are invited to participate in the decision making in their organizations in a democratic way, they are more likely to also engage as active citizens and participate in democratic processes in their society. And young people are often more keen to volunteer, when they have a say in their organization.

»» What is a volunteer?

A volunteer is a person, who assumes a responsibility and commits time and energy to do something for the benefit of society, the local community or individuals/ groups outside of one's immediate family.

Voluntary work is undertaken freely and by choice. It is unpaid, although volunteers can sometimes receive compensation so that they don't spend money by volunteering.

Young people learn democratic values, when they are trusted with responsibility, cooperate with others and are encouraged to participate in the decision making in their organization in a democratic way.

HOW TO WORK WITH VOLUNTEERISM IN YOUR PARTNERSHIP AND PROJECT?

DUF supported projects are required to promote volunteerism and ensure that volunteers have a say in the organizations that carry out the projects.

Volunteering happens in many different ways – it depends on the organization and society you are part of.



A crosscutting requirement

DUF's international work rests on three crosscutting requirements which your project has to integrate in the analysis of the context and the project design. Volunteerism is one of the requirements.

In your project application, you must analyze the following:

- You must describe the local culture of volunteerism in the partner organization and the local society, and on that basis explain how the project can promote voluntary engagement.
- You must explain what role the volunteers play in the organization and examine their opportunities for influence.
- In your project, you must also consider how your project works to involve and engage volunteers and how to ensure that the volunteers' have a say in the organizations.

Some organizations are entirely managed by volunteers while others depend on staff to take care of the daily management.

Some organizations have boards consisting of young volunteers/ members, who are above the paid staff in the organizational hierarchy – whereas other organizations have children's councils or youth representatives in the board to ensure that young members and volunteers have a say.

Some organizations see the promotion of **volunteerism is seen as a goal in itself**, in other organizations **volunteers are understood as a means to reach a goal**.

It is important to ask yourself **how to motivate volunteers** – in your organization and partnership. Leading and managing volunteers requires similar competences as leading and managing paid staff.

And in addition, the manager of volunteers must motivate people to create results together without providing salaries.



»» DUF recommends you look into volunteer culture during your partner identification and explore the theme together in your partnership in a preparatory study. It can be a good starting point to analyze the value and importance of the voluntary work in relation to the individual volunteer, the organization and the local society.

»» A conversation on volunteer culture

To **understand the volunteer culture in an organization** it is often useful to talk about the following themes:

- How is volunteerism **understood** and how are volunteers **valued** in the organization?
- What are the **organizational structures, roles and responsibilities** of staff, board, volunteers and members?

To **understand the volunteer culture of a society** it is often useful to look at the following:

- How is volunteerism **understood** and **valued** in your society? For example, do employers recognize volunteer experience? Is there a tradition of volunteerism in your society?
- What **formal policies** and **structures** support (or hinder) volunteer engagement in your society? For example a civil society policy, a national volunteerism council or financial support for volunteer based organizations?

DUF sees volunteering as a two-way relationship: You need to balance the **needs of the organization** with the **motivations of the volunteers**. And you cannot order volunteers to do something they don't want to do – they will just leave.

In DUFs experience **volunteers are motivated by many different things** – depending on who they are and their life situation. The motivations below are common, but the list is not exhaustive:

- **Meaningfulness:** I involve myself in a cause, that is larger than myself. I make a difference.
- **Responsibility and conscience:** I feel that I have a sense of duty towards my society
- **Interesting activity:** I participate in an activity that is of interest to me and has a certain quality.
- **Community:** I'm socially stimulated by participating in a community of action
- **Learning:** I learn a lot through my engagement – and use my competencies
- **Influence and participation:** I have a say and I feel that I am listened to in regards to the activities I do. That makes me feel ownership to the work we do.
- **Personal recognition:** I feel recognized and valued for the work I do

DUF recommends that you ask why volunteers like to work with your organization – and analyze how you can best motivate volunteers in their work.

It is equally important to find out what demotivates volunteers. In our experience, volunteers have a tendency to feel demotivated from working with an organization:

- When they are not welcomed and not appreciated – by staff and other volunteers
- When the communication from the management is not clear and timely and meetings are not well structured
- When the tasks and responsibilities are unclear – or when the framework for the work is too tight and the volunteers cannot influence their own tasks
- When they cannot get support and help
- When there is a tense atmosphere and conflicts are not resolved

»» A conversation on volunteer culture

The Youth Clubs of Denmark – Ungdomsringen (UNGR) and Straight Talk Foundation in Uganda have worked together for some years. During this time, the organizations have been inspired by each other's ways of working with volunteers. For instance Ungdomsringen has been inspired by Straight Talk to involve experienced youth to work together with younger members of the youth clubs, rather than only depending on paid adult staff.

The project manager, Allan, from UNGR explains: *“Before this partnership, volunteers were not part of the youth clubs. No one thought about them, we paid everyone. That time we had a lot of money, and after cut downs, I became aware of the Straight Talk Foundation concept of senior groups, where more experienced youth are teaching the younger ones. We adopted it into our work for a music festival, where we asked some of the older youth from the preparing group last year to come and teach the younger ones. The first time we did that the number of visitors to the music festival increased ten times and the teacher was mostly supporting, while the youngsters made the festival on their own”.*

The partnership works together to set up youth clubs in Uganda. They have also decided to work strategically to motivate and retain experienced volunteers and have recently designed a volunteer strategy and policy to support the project work with youth clubs in Uganda.

Hassan, the project manager of STF explains: *“There must be a level of consistency in the people who are part of the project. Some of the youth we have to work with are completely new, so there must be a level of consistency to maintain continuity throughout the pilot and partnership projects”.*

The partnership also gives an example of how the value and role of young volunteers can be understood in many different ways. DUF's ideas of volunteer engagement and influence can sometimes be difficult to understand for organizations that are not used to that young volunteers have a large degree of influence in the projects and partnerships.

Hassan explains: *“One of the challenges has been at the organizational level to make everyone understand the unique way of how DUF works. Because quite often, I get asked by the other staff: You are taking youngsters to Denmark. When will you take us? How sure are you that the youth have the competence level to represent the organization? And I say, it doesn't work like that. And I keep telling them in the staff meetings that the project we are having is one of those projects where you have that real meaning of youth participation, the right of youth to participate. We see that much more strongly coming out in the projects we have supported by DUF than any other projects that we work with at STF. This is not a project for the staff, but for the youth clubs. But slowly by slowly, people start to appreciate this”.*

It can be helpful to formulate a strategy for volunteer engagement as well as a volunteer policy to guide your work with volunteers in the project and in each organization.

A **volunteer strategy** helps you to translate your organizational vision into an overall plan for involving the volunteers to reach your organizational goals.

It entails a focus on:

- Why you involve volunteers
- How you involve volunteers, the purpose and priority of the work they do, how you divide roles and responsibilities among staff, board and volunteers.

A **volunteer policy** is a tool to help you divide roles and responsibilities among volunteers, board and staff – and clarify expectations between the volunteers and the organizations. It entails a focus on:

- The division of roles and responsibilities in practice
- The expectations between the organization and the volunteers

A recurring challenge in many youth organizations is **attracting** new volunteers, **retaining** experienced volunteers and ensuring **handover of experience** among experienced and new volunteers. Often young people are moving home, they are starting education or work and they move on from one volunteer opportunity to the next as their interests change.

FURTHER INSPIRATION

There are no one-size-fits-all tools you can use for working with volunteers in your organizations and projects.

DUF has created a set of questions and ideas for how to start a conversation on volunteerism and volunteers:

The tools **Organizational landscape and volunteer culture** and **A dialogue on motivations** are helpful for exploring why and how volunteers are engaged in your organization and project.

The tools can also be useful – together with the tool **Good advice on attraction and retention of volunteers – and hand-over**, when you are considering how best to motivate and support volunteers.

Meet up with DUFs consultants

DUF can provide inspiration on how to work with volunteers in your organizations and give advice on the design of volunteer strategies and policies in your projects.

»» A good match of partners is based on careful considerations and honest conversations about common interests and ways of working together.

It can be a challenge to match a volunteer based organization with a professional NGO with staff, as DUF support is geared for volunteer based projects.

In such cases it is important that both partners see a value in volunteerism and commit to promote volunteer engagement.



Ask yourselves...

The DUF study “Associations for the future”, 2014 shows that young people’s engagement in democratic youth associations in Denmark contributes to:

- Young people’s personal development, sense of identity and success in education and work life
- Young peoples’ sense of social responsibility and active citizenship
- Social trust and inclusion of marginalized youth in social life
- Value to society

»» This paper presents DUFs considerations on volunteerism – as well as ideas and tools for working with volunteers in your partnership.

Our most important advice is to tailor your approach to your own organizational setup, the work of your organizations and the context you are working in. That is why the paper doesn’t give prescriptions or specific answers to how you should work with volunteers. Instead we encourage you to think through themes, that we have found to be important to DUF supported partnerships.

We have included the tools used in DUFs learning activities – and we refer you on to other toolkits that we find inspiring. In doing so, we hope to stimulate your own thinking and ideas on how the methods and tools we present may be useful in your own work to create positive change.

There are many other ideas, approaches and tools that are used by young people in civil society organizations that are not included in this paper. Please share your own experiences, ideas and stories with us in order to make the toolbox more practically relevant for others. There are no deadlines and new pages and tools can be added at any time.