The More We're Different, the More We're the Same

By Susan J. Ellis

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I have just returned from two weeks of consulting and training in Israel. The time I spent in this land of contrasts and contradictions came in the middle of what will be a very international year of travel for me. Since January I have also been to England twice (once to London and once to Leeds) and to Winnipeg, Canada. In September, I return to Singapore and Australia for my fourth training tour in both places. Given my other reflections during this 30th birthday year for Energize, this seemed like a good opportunity to comment on my observations of global volunteerism.

All in all, I have been privileged to conduct sessions for all sorts of volunteer management audiences in 23 different countries and 48 of the United States (Montana and Wyoming are the only ones left). I never take the geographic distances for granted and always stress that conference participants are the ones with the important knowledge of their own communities. I come as the outsider, providing an external perspective and the chance for everyone to step back and look a bit differently at their own work. I always say: "You are free to reject anything I say, as long as you do so for sound and thoughtful reasons and not because of where I come from."

I start every trip with as few assumptions and as much preparation as possible. Yet over and over I discover that – although the audience may look different in face or dress, or live under a government or a belief system quite different from my own – the basic issues of our field really do seem universal. Here are a few examples.

Every country has some form of volunteering tradition.

I hope that we have long ago rejected the often-repeated phrase that volunteering is "uniquely American" (or, at least, Anglo-Saxon). It is simply not true. There's not a place in the world that has not developed methods of helping the poor, the sick, the bereaved. Every religion has its equivalent of charitable acts and can quote its own holy books on the subject.

What's different is the existence or strength of what we call *the voluntary sector* (or *nonprofit* or *non-governmental* organizations) in each country. Dictatorships, communist/socialist countries, and religion-based governments tend to control formal helping systems and other aspects of social life. But even in such restricted communities, people tend to organize themselves informally, whether to tend children, share food, pass along censored information from the Internet, or operate an anti-government underground network. This is *their* "volunteering."

The word "volunteer"—if it exists at all – seems burdened with the same stereotypes in every language.

While conducting a simultaneously translated workshop in Helsinki, Finland some years back, I asked this convoluted question, in English of course: "When someone says the word 'volunteer' in the Finnish language, what do people think of or picture?" The workshop participants called out things in Finnish. Immediately, the interpreters were giving me words in English such as: "women," "old people who are retired," "someone who helps," "not professional." Sound familiar? I have yet to find a culture in which these stereotypic images do not hold sway, which undoubtedly merits further exploration.

Of course, many languages do not have a word that exactly translates into "volunteer." So my first job is to probe the existing vocabulary and find the terms that are used to describe activities that benefit others without monetary pay in that culture. There always are some and we therefore start our discussions from there.

The concept of "family" matters a great deal.

In many cultures, especially in the Asian and the Arabic worlds, "community" is defined more by kinship ties than by geographic location. The Japanese, for example, will often say that they "discovered" volunteering in the Western sense after the Kobe earthquake in 1995. 3,000 people were killed instantly and one-third of the city was left homeless. In response, Japanese from all over the country sent aid in a coordinated way that copied what they had seen in other countries beset by natural disasters.

Yet the Japanese (and most Asian cultures) have an ancient family structure, with multi-generation households and close ties to ancestors. We would consider a 17th cousin eight times removed to be a stranger; but even a tenuous blood tie would assure recognition as a family member throughout the East. And family members are always assisted in many ways.

Similarly, assistance to the elderly is given in most places, but is considered a natural obligation in some cultures rather than a community service between strangers in others. Last week, for example, a Circassian Muslim village I visited was explaining that it did not participate in a national alert bracelet system (staffed by volunteers centrally in Jerusalem) because it was unthinkable that any older person would be left alone.

Even if the population is segregated in some way, each of the segments organizes itself along parallel tracks.

When Katie Campbell and I were researching *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers*, we found a pattern repeated by every new ethnic migration in the United States: each population segregated from the mainstream formed its own organizations, frequently mirroring those in the established culture. This is certainly the case for African-Americans, whose historic associations are often neglected in history books. For example, most Americans learn about the Grange and the various Farmers Alliances, but are unaware of the Colored Farmers Alliance that similarly supported its own members.

In Singapore, a small country with roots in India, Malaysia, China, and Europe, finds itself awash with civic groups still representing each thread of the culture – and often mirroring each other. A week ago I sat in a building in Beersheba run by AJEEC (Arab-Jewish Center for Equality, Empowerment and Cooperation) as the "Bedouin Volunteer Tent" and met a dozen of the young volunteers attempting to provide services to their tribal families, among the poorest in Israel. I was there with my clients, Yad Sarah, the largest volunteer-involving agency in Israel with its own small branch less than a mile away.

The first question posed by workshop participants is almost always about tension between volunteers and paid staff.

It never fails. Although the question is often asked in some embarrassment, it is also asked out of sheer frustration. And guess what? The *causes* for resistance of paid staff to volunteer involvement also boil down to commonalities:

1. Few professions receive training in how to work with volunteers, yet are expected to do so on the job.
2. Lack of clearly defined roles, expectations, and lines of authority.
3. Uncertainty about whether volunteers can be held accountable.
4. Lack of engagement by top executives on this subject.

Also, when I note that experienced volunteers can do worse things to new volunteers than anything the employees can dream up, there is much nodding of heads!

Volunteer resource managers are welcoming and genuinely friendly.

People often ask me if I know anyone at my next destination and often I don't (except for a keyboard relationship in the planning of the visit). But I'm never worried. A common denominator among leaders of volunteers everywhere in the world is friendliness. A hallmark of our profession is that we

genuinely like people and tend to see the best in others. We smile a lot and we can always start a conversation (*ending* them is the hard part!).

The best practitioners are inquisitive, enthusiastic, and flexible. They roll with the punches if the microphones fail or the lunch is late. They are concerned about the speaker's comfort (in Singapore they always meet me at the airport with cold water and a towel, since I tend to melt in the equatorial heat as soon as I disembark the plane). They juggle the oddest assortment of volunteers, projects, and schedules, usually with good humor.

So that's why I don't tire of my travels. I may hate airport security lines and fight off jet lag, but I always know that my destination will allow me to meet wonderful colleagues doing extraordinary things with volunteers – well worth the journey.

1.
   - *If you've traveled abroad and met colleagues in other countries, what did you find you shared in common? Or what was really different?*
   - *What can we learn about leading volunteers from the similarities between our different countries and cultures?*
   - *What can we learn from our differences?*

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Posted on 9 July 2007 by Jayne Cravens, UNDP, Kabul Afghanistan
I've had *many* people from countries outside the USA, upon learning about my work in volunteer management, tell me that they disagree entirely with the idea of formalized volunteering, where volunteers undertake activities through organizations, whether nonprofits or the government. They feel that promotion of volunteering is an attempt by organizations and the government to get out of paying people for tasks that need doing (and I have to admit, certain government-sponsored campaigns have made me think this as well). Therefore, in other countries, it's especially critical, when promoting volunteerism, to emphasize the reasons why organizations should involve volunteers that have nothing to do with money.

Also, there is a real reluctance (even hostility) in other countries to count those engaged in advocacy work as volunteers, particularly if those volunteers are working to change the government or society, or to stop a particular government or corporate activity. I encountered this in London during a conference -- the speaker would not acknowledge, under any circumstances, that those who were actively in such activities, entirely unpaid, as civic volunteers.

Submitted on 5 July 2007 by Steve McCurley, VM Systems,Olympia, WA USA
If you don't think volunteering is about the same everywhere, check out this article from India about the problems they are having getting people to believe that volunteering in social services isn't just

for "jobless people who have nothing else to do in life:" cities.expressindia.com/fullstory.php?newsid=243948

I'm continually surprised by how often I encounter exactly the same questions and difficulties in every country I go to.

Submitted on 4 July 2007 by Christine Russell, Northside Community Forum Inc., Regional Volunteer Support Worker, Sydney Australia
A great article - what a terrific summary of the enormous achievement of volunteerism worldwide

Submitted on 4 July 2007 by John Ramsey, Age Concern England, National Volunteer Development Manager, London UK
A few weeks ago I was in Russia giving training to a number of Russian NGOs on how volunteers can help deliver services. A geographically disparate group of organisations, they had two things in common; they all involved volunteers and none of them had heard of 'volunteer management'

And yet as the day progressed it became clear that as we went through stuff like motivations, benefits etc, all the basic principles were the same.

One interesting point that did arise from it was the greater emphasis they placed on the role volunteering has in developing a civil society which, I think, is due to the context they're working in, i.e., the breakdown of USSR and how society/citizenship is developing in Russia.

Submitted on 3 July 2007 by Joan Brown, California
Thank you for this outstanding paper on international volunteerism.