

# Multicultural Volunteering: Reflections on the 'salad bowl' approach

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## ABSTRACT

*This article investigates means to maximise multicultural volunteering through cultural exchange and cooperation. The metaphor of the 'salad bowl' is used to describe the process whereby parties from diverse backgrounds combine their efforts and skills, contributing to a common cause. It is suggested that negotiation of differences benefits the wider community since it strengthens social cohesion.*

*The Vietnamese Good Beginnings initiative illustrates a collaborative effort engaging volunteers from a particular ethnic population to meet specific community needs. The project illustrates issues which also apply in other areas of volunteering.*

*A set of questions has been added as a practical tool for investigation of organisational structures with regard to inclusiveness of volunteering activities. These questions could also be applied to examine personal attitudes and beliefs which inform those structures and activities. It is hoped that this article provides inspiration to further explore opportunities to enhance volunteering.*

## Introduction

In a culturally diverse environment, multicultural volunteering arises out of interest and necessity. Volunteer initiatives seeking to claim a broad mandate must reflect the diversity of the population and their interests. Concurrently, specific needs of communities can only be met through volunteer activities which take cultural backgrounds and language requirements of respective populations into account. Both settings provide opportunities for people from a variety of backgrounds to work together or to engage in partnerships, demonstrating a multicultural approach to volunteering.

Margie Hopkins (1993) observes that: 'Working in a multicultural community means that all organisations, whether mainstream or ethno-specific, are challenged to provide opportunities for workers to participate equally'.

Although we welcome and value diversity, currently available resources could be expanded through systematically diversifying volunteering activities. The key strategy in this venture is appreciation and negotiation of difference. The example of the *Good Beginnings* National Parenting Project illustrates challenges and rewards encountered in this process.

A comprehensive multicultural approach to volunteering yields innumerable opportunities for increasing understanding among individuals and community groups. The social and economic benefits through maximising cross-cultural communication and exchange are manifold, with substantial potential to increase social cohesion.

### From 'melting pot' to 'salad bowl'

In an article on *cultural pluralism* Kochman (1990 p.219) uses the images of 'melting pot' and 'salad bowl', referring to the different ways in which ethnic/minority cultures and the mainstream/dominant culture interact. As the words suggest, the 'melting pot' describes the process of the merging of elements through application of heat; whereas the 'salad bowl' refers to the arrangement of distinctly separate parts, combining to a whole. Whilst the 'melting pot' image is predicated upon a model with outdated assimilationist propensities, the 'salad bowl' metaphor is more in accordance with current approaches to the management of diversity.

Following the 'salad bowl' principle, people who refer to particular skills and views attained through their cultural conditioning are welcomed and unique contributions are considered assets. The individual components enhance the prominent characteristics of each other and the combination of the various elements is larger than the sum total of the single parts.

Such practice enables people in the volunteering realm to participate equally in activities. Furthermore, volunteers are invited to make their unique skills available. For this to occur it is not sufficient to proclaim goodwill, or to engage in token efforts to comply with anti-discriminatory/equity legislation. Instead it requires active encouragement and responsiveness to different wants and needs of people, which arise from diverse cultural conditioning. This can be achieved through an environment which enables people to act and to develop on the basis of their cultural and language background.

### Appreciating difference

Cultural differences permeate every aspect of our being. Encounters might be cumbersome or lead to conflict if diverse values and needs of people are not taken into account. Cross-cultural contacts can assist in recognising the subjective nature of individual standards and views.

Different conceptual frameworks inform attitudes of individuals and population groups. For example, some cultures favour individualism, while others emphasise collectivity. 'Collective cultures' value harmony, cooperation, and group-accountability over individual function and responsibility (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988 p.40). In terms of volunteering, such cultural conditioning influences the way people perceive their responsibilities.

In the light of different and even contradictory cultural values, some people question the possibility of a 'shared vision'. Instead, they suggest that constant negotiation of differences is essential, to achieve social cohesion (Cope & Kalantzis 1997 p.262 p.279). Negotiation implies participation of at least two parties, expression

of views, debate, and commitment to seeking mutually agreeable solutions. This notion is in accordance with the 'salad bowl' principle, which emphasises the preservation of distinct features or elements, in such a way as to create a more dynamic and expansive 'whole'.

There is scope to diversify programs and activities across all kinds of organisational structures such as ethno-specific services, mainstream services, and programs addressing selected ethnic or language groups. Organisational structures must enable volunteers to fully apply their knowledge and skills, including those which are informed by values from their cultural origin.

Adaptation of programs requires a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness from volunteer coordinators as well as those who plan and manage programs. To meet this challenge seems worthwhile with the prospect of attracting volunteers who hitherto would not have considered becoming involved.

One way to open programs and invite participation is through creation of environments in which people are welcome to organise and/or express themselves in ways with which they feel familiar. To create such environments requires negotiation and responsiveness of the different parties involved in activities. The Vietnamese *Good Beginnings* Project outlined below is one example of an organisation implementing this approach.

The area of cross cultural exchange generally and of matching volunteers and clients across different cultural and language backgrounds is a complex area, raising a whole range of interesting issues. It is beyond the scope of this article to address these issues here.

### **The Vietnamese *Good Beginnings* initiative**

The *Good Beginnings* National Parenting Project is a volunteer home visiting program, providing support to families with young children. The program is piloted in four different states with a first training conducted in Sydney for Vietnamese volunteers.

*Good Beginnings* encourages the development of partnerships between families, professionals and volunteers in distinct geographical areas. The focus is on enabling parents to choose services which meet their needs, thereby improving health and social well-being of families and communities.

Volunteers/community parents are matched with families in the local area. They share their information on child development, parenting skills and local resources, and validate the skills and efforts of parents. Volunteer visitors encourage parents to build on their positive experiences and strengths to reduce stress and to increase enjoyment

of parenting. A volunteer coordinator conducts training, provides support to volunteers and matches families with community parents.

Training is adapted to the needs of particular groups. It aims to assist the volunteers to integrate and use their experiences and skills as well as gain new knowledge and develop new skills. The process used for training volunteers is designed to model the process that the volunteers will use when they are working with families.

### **Negotiation and responsiveness in the project**

Different families have different needs which change over time. Therefore a range of services must be available to enable families themselves to make choices.

The Vietnamese project was a response to a perceived need and has arisen out of the collaboration between *Good Beginnings* and a local Council. The latter seconded a Vietnamese worker to establish an advisory committee of Vietnamese health and welfare workers who contribute their expertise in order to advise on program development and volunteer support.

Some of the training material was found to be unsuitable because of its mainstream cultural assumptions. Adaptation of the material was negotiated between management, volunteer coordinator and the Vietnamese worker, and alterations were made in consultation with the advisory committee. The Vietnamese worker translated the training content and coordinated the first training for *Good Beginnings* volunteers in their community language.

The Vietnamese project developed as a result of the willingness and competence of management and staff to engage in negotiation. The Vietnamese worker excelled in her achievements because she negotiated various work commitments and skillfully drew on her professional network. She engaged the cooperation of other Vietnamese professionals from ethno-specific and mainstream services, through which partnerships were established, particularly in the area of health and family support. Currently support structures and resources for families and volunteers are being developed, such as a directory of local services and resources relevant to Vietnamese parents of young children and their volunteer visitors.

Some key issues which arose in the Vietnamese project required review of standard procedures and warrant mentioning, since they might also apply in other environments. Listed below are areas which require responsiveness and ongoing negotiation of alternative strategies.

- The notion of 'volunteering' might not be a familiar concept for some people. In Australia, a 'culture of social services' has developed, and there is a history of involvement of volunteers in the welfare sector. In Vietnam people traditionally turn to family members for assistance and advice. Thus, while the notion of 'giving a hand' might be well practised in every day life, the language and concepts might seem strange. Therefore, the Vietnamese project coordinator suggested ongoing discussions, both individually and in groups, to address volunteering tasks and roles.
- Potential volunteers need to know that they can do the task and that their language skills are sufficient. The recruitment process requires a positive message emphasising that people are welcome and considered competent to fulfil the volunteering role.
- It was recognised that the notion of 'confidentiality' might be new for some volunteers, and it was imperative to convey the importance of this principle, in order for the program to succeed. Confidentiality could also be an issue, in terms of programs being confined to a local area. Ethnic communities are relatively small and people might not accept volunteers from the local area. Flexible arrangements would have to be made to alleviate such concerns.
- Some volunteers have never been formally employed, and a range of skills, which might be assumed, have not been developed. Therefore, training content and methods must be 'pitched' appropriately and might need follow up discussion.
- Volunteers might be dealing with aspects of their own settlement, or have little knowledge of how health or social systems work in Australia. Support on a broad range of issues might be necessary, rather than only task oriented advice.

The relationship between immigration and volunteering warrants further attention. Researchers assert that the experience of culture shock has a potentially positive influence on 'social and professional effectiveness' (Dahl 1998 Ch 5). The migration process possibly constitutes a profound learning experience in which people acquire substantial negotiation skills. The latter could be a great asset to be harnessed in multicultural volunteering projects.

The size of communities and their age, whether a community is established or whether most members have arrived recently, impacts on the capacity of individuals and groups to volunteer. The availability of professional support from the same language/ethnic background depends on size and age of communities and is an important element in terms of assisting in the development and care of volunteers.

Generally ethnic communities have limited resources and attention must be paid to support them adequately, so that a relatively small number of individuals do not have to take sole responsibility for a whole range of activities. In the case of *Good*

*Beginnings* the ongoing support of community parents is shared by the Vietnamese worker, the volunteer coordinator and the advisory committee. Members of the committee are prepared to give one-to-one advice, drawing on their respective fields of expertise and respond to the particular requirements of individual volunteers. The project therefore is an excellent example of creating a culturally appropriate response to the support need of volunteers.

### **Working in partnership**

The development of communities is a responsibility of a wide range of agencies and services. Working in partnerships seems to be the most practical way to enable projects, sharing scarce resources and expertise. When groups work together, horizons expand and possibilities arise which cannot be achieved individually. The element of cross-cultural exchange adds to the opportunities for creative expression, innovation and creation of a cohesive Australian social fabric.

Volunteering Centres can play a crucial role in 'tossing and mixing', encouraging local networking and information exchange between a variety of agencies which previously have not interacted with each other. On a local and national level, multicultural approaches could be promoted and actively demonstrated through interagency work, especially in the areas of volunteer education and advocacy.

### **Benefits to communities**

Through creation of an environment of mutual respect and shared expertise resources are increased on an individual and an institutional level. 'Mainstream' organisations working with volunteers, expand their knowledge through consultation with ethnic communities, and possibly broaden their base of volunteers. Concurrently, ethnic initiatives benefit from cooperation with and support of mainstream agencies.

The learning which takes place on a personal level might well be adapted to other situations. For example volunteers could pass their knowledge and inspiration on to their families and communities. Similarly, traditional practices, which have served communities well over the years, might yield solutions to current challenges faced by society generally. In both circumstances the social fabric of communities is strengthened through cross cultural communication. Advancements positively impact on a local level, and add to the cohesiveness of society at large.

It can be assumed that volunteering activities might also yield economic benefits. For example, the positive relationship between social well-being and health status is implied in current definitions of health. Presumably the social connections which volunteers form through their activities therefore contribute to improved well-being, which in turn engenders financial savings in health care costs. Although it is impossible to specify any dollar value, the argument of cost-savings is persuasive and compatible with prevailing economic rationalist theories and strategies.

### **Some practical suggestions ....**

For readers interested in exploring possibilities of diversifying the programs and activities in which they are engaged, the following questions might assist to examine personal and/or organisational beliefs and views, underlying programs and practices.

The questions could also give rise to discussion among various stakeholders interested in forming partnerships, to launch cross-cultural projects.

Which processes do we employ to actively encourage communities to generate their own ideas regarding participation in volunteering?

Does our planning target particular communities in our locality?

What are our services? Are they relevant to people from diverse cultural/language backgrounds?

Who are our volunteers? Do they represent a wide range of the population?

Which values do we promote? Do we allow for difference, welcome it?

What are our practices? Are elements offensive/attractive to different communities?

Which message do we give through our written material? Is it in plain English? Does it exist in a community language? Is the format attractive to people from different cultures?

What is the decor of our premises? Is it inclusive/attractive to people from diverse backgrounds?

Which message do we give through the composition of our staff? Are there representatives from diverse backgrounds?

To genuinely open a project/service to diverse communities involves establishment of advisory groups, networking with ethnic organisations, sharing decision-making and using ethnic media for recruitment and promotion. Each of these activities involves negotiation of difference, which leads to the development of culturally appropriate resources and increases the relevance of activities to the local population. Furthermore, the potential for improving access to programs and activities demonstrates a commitment to human rights and equity principles.

### **Conclusion**

The existing diversity of cultural values and beliefs cannot be denied, nor can it be reduced to one mutually acceptable formula. An appreciation of difference enables people to extend their vision beyond ethnocentric views, and to focus on the well-being of society as a whole.

It can be a joyful and challenging experience to contribute to the metaphorical 'salad bowl', displaying distinct characteristics, including views and skills which might be shaped in different cultural climates. The more frequently people engage in this process the richer will be the contemporary cultural context created through unique contributions.

There is an untapped potential for the volunteering sector to engage in activities which generate and encourage cultural exchange and communication. Thereby opportunities are created for innovation, including partnerships between professional and volunteer services. In collaborative ventures views and ideas can be exchanged, which complement, enrich and enhance the roles and well-being of various stakeholders. Overall the process of negotiation employed in those partnerships strengthens the social fabric of society at large and equates with the development and maintenance of sustainable communities.

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