
policy and practice

Becoming a volunteer: first impressions of volunteering in community food projects

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In this practice paper, a number of ‘first impressions’ from practical volunteering in community food projects are explored through academic and grey literature: the complexity of decision making; valorising the symptoms rather than the causes of problems; shunting risk; and the marketisation of both volunteering and community food projects. Volunteers, as policy takers, can only soften rather than resolve these issues. The state’s view of the advantages of using volunteers corresponds to the main difficulties of volunteering, for volunteers.

Key words complex decisions • risk shunting • marketisation • symptoms, not causes

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Volunteering and community food: introduction

This practice paper analyses five issues associated with volunteering in community food projects.¹ This is not an entirely new area of study. [Rondeau et al \(2020\)](#) have evaluated the motivations of volunteers in community food projects in a Canadian context. [Armour and Barton \(2019\)](#) too, have explored the positive psychological wellbeing impacts of volunteering in food banks, while [Iafrazi \(2018\)](#) has examined the tensions involved in volunteering in food banks at times of quickly increasing demand for their services. The novelty of this paper is that it is written through the lens of a ‘new entrant’ to volunteering, as a personal reflection on those things that create salient first impressions: first challenges. This may be of value to professionals who induct new volunteers. The ‘everyday’ for them may be the ‘unfamiliar’ to newcomers.

The paper is structured according to the five issues. These are:

- difficulties in dealing with the complex nature of the decision-making processes facing voluntary organisations;
- the way in which addressing symptoms rather than causes becomes valorised into an accepted purpose;
- the way risk is shunted from the state to the voluntary sector (and within the voluntary sector from ‘stronger’ to ‘weaker’ organisations);

- the way in which the marketisation of volunteering impairs its effectiveness;
- the way in which the marketisation of the community food sector inhibits the potential to deliver non-market objectives.

It is noted that the state's articulated advantages of commissioning volunteers closely mirror the main challenges of volunteering. Conclusions are drawn in respect of implications for practical action to ameliorate these challenges, again drawn from personal volunteer experience.

A reflective practice approach

As a full participant observer, I have drawn on reflective practice to build, and question, these first impressions. This is an approach adopted in the community food domain, for example by [Fardkhales and Lincoln \(2021\)](#), who wrote from the community practitioner standpoint in exploring community food hub responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Hawaii. It requires the researcher to reflect on practices in order to recognise the assumptions, frameworks and patterns of thought and behaviour that shape thinking and action ([Harvey et al, 2017](#)).

[Bilous et al \(2018\)](#) champion this research approach: it can distil common issues and points of reference, recognisable by practitioners from diverse backgrounds. This reflective 'insider-researcher' approach can also elicit a complexity of issues not so apparent in research by 'outsider' researchers. As well as a research approach, reflection can inform research agendas. As [Hammersley \(2012\)](#) stresses, for practitioners it can be a valuable tool with which to build research co-creation with academics. Such reflection can also inform researchers of practitioner priority issues. As [Morton-Cooper \(2000\)](#) highlights, these can all be important in the context of 'the deregulation of services and economies seen throughout health and social care systems' (cited in [McIntosh, 2010: 33](#)).

As a retired academic keen to move from analysis to action, I set up a constituted unincorporated community association – the Lincolnshire Food Partnership – in 2016, to develop practical means of addressing food market failures (environment, health, poverty, security, justice) with which I had become familiar as a researcher. The organisation was developed entirely on a voluntary basis in its first four years, after which it engaged a part-time paid coordinator. I also joined the boards of a number of other (public and voluntary) local organisations as a volunteer – in the health, environment, economic and poverty domains – in order to make connections in (and seek to influence) the local social and economic systems in which community food action played out ([Curry, 2022](#)). It is from this standpoint that 'first impressions' as a volunteer have been garnered.

The thrust of the paper is to seat these 'first impressions' in academic and grey literature, to explore their broader evidential basis.

Volunteering and complex decisions

Volunteering in community food projects requires multiple objectives to be addressed simultaneously – decision making is complex. Environmental objectives (for example, as few food miles as possible, food waste reduction, and chemical inputs) are possibly

the most important (Berti and Mulligan, 2016); food health objectives (addressing obesity and poor diets) are possibly the biggest challenge (Dwivedi et al, 2017); and food security and food poverty objectives are possibly the most pressing (Rose, 2017). In Lincolnshire, allocating voluntary effort appropriately across this range of objectives invariably required reconciliation, particularly between volunteers motivated by ‘local knowledge’ emic perspectives on food and those with more ‘scientific knowledge’ etic perspectives.

But there are market objectives too. The push for good-quality fresh, local food commonly requires supporting local community agriculture through paying premium prices (Colasanti et al, 2018), or paying for food in advance as a gesture of risk sharing and loyalty (O’Hara and Stagl, 2001). The success of these objectives is also measured in very different ways.

In addition to complexity from multiple objectives, divergent and even opposing views and priorities among the volunteer community itself must often be reconciled (Hutchins and Hazlehurst, 1992). Volunteers bring a range of disparate value systems, motivations and priorities, relating to social justice, equality and institutional support, for example (Scottish Government, 2016). Ethical issues, too, surrounding, for example, asset acquisition, procurement, finance and investment, must commonly be resolved (Heap et al, 2017).

Complexity is also increased through collective working. A Lincolnshire survey (Involving Lincs, 2015) found that 70 per cent of voluntary groups in the county worked in partnership (for funding applications, developing good practice and service delivery), while at the same time competing. Here, partnership aspirations are rarely prioritised over those of individual voluntary group objectives, and partnerships always have some losers and some gainers (Bock, 2016).

Crowding and voluntary group instability can also add to decision-making complexity. The Lincoln Food Strategy (University of Lincoln, 2016) found 94 city voluntary groups with an interest in food in 2016. This had dropped to 84 by 2017, but many of these were different organisations from those in the earlier survey. Lack of access to finance was the main reason for these groups disbanding. More generally, this volunteering instability among individuals has been attributed to a lack of time, a lack of reward or satisfaction and having to take on too much responsibility or too many liabilities (Hustinx, 2010). The resulting volunteer churn contributes further to decision-making complexity.

Complexity is compounded through external agency. Martin et al (2015) note the pressure (coercive and indirect) placed on community food groups by economic development agencies to become more commercially oriented. Expanding and changing regulatory requirements too (such as safeguarding, child protection and liability insurance) and exogenous policy requirements (for example, environment, corporate social responsibility, equal opportunities and waste) (Wilts, 2016) further complicate decision making, particularly where many voluntary groups are too small to have the resources to respond to such requirements fully.

Volunteers can thus be commonly required to address much greater decision-making complexity than is often present in their professional and working lives. Certainly in a leadership role, Heap et al (2017) note that volunteers commonly have to reconcile social justice, social entrepreneurial and equity goals. And as this complexity increases, so does the likelihood of making ‘wrong’ decisions (North, 2005).

Addressing symptoms rather than causes

‘There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.’²

Community food groups can be ‘forced’ into tackling the symptoms of food problems rather than their causes, because, in part, they have no control over policy levers (Edward and Willmott, 2013). In terms of food poverty, says Tilly (2005), voluntary groups have been traditionally associated with the ‘relief of poverty’ rather than tackling its underlying causes (the general poverty of limited life chances and inadequate income, within the economy generally). In Lincolnshire, for example, the Food Partnership put much effort into developing a network of the county’s 59 foodbanks and persuading Fare Share (the national food waste redistributor) to open a depot in the county. It had no clear action plan at all for reducing the need for food banks. Thus, food banks tackle the *symptoms* (a lack of adequate food) rather than the causes. In this context, the vision of The Trussell Trust (2021) is: ‘A UK without the need for food banks.’ But this can be achieved only by resolving the causes of food poverty, which requires advocacy (Ellis, 2001). This is seen as a higher-level political involvement relative to the hands-on work of delivering aid (Eliasoph, 2013). Most volunteers, claims Ellis (2001), prefer the latter, even though volunteers are often less hidebound than legal organisations to ‘speak their mind’.

Wilen (2006) also suggests that, once advocacy is declared, it is often seen as adversarial, and the non-neutrality of the advocate limits the power to take part in addressing causes. Dean (2015: 141), too, suggests that the pressures of delivering service contracts to the state require voluntary groups to depoliticise, forcing ‘their efforts onto symptoms rather than root causes, and tackling short term and individual issues as opposed to campaigning for underlying change to tackle structural inequalities’. Thus, food banks began as an effort to end hunger but have evolved into a service to ‘help’ hungry people. In this, they are praised by the state for their work, but challenging the state about food poverty causes is seen as threatening:

‘Take food banks. Chris Mould, chair of the Trussell Trust which gave emergency food to 900,000 people in 2013–14, told us last year that when the charity called for action to tackle the causes of food poverty, there were angry conversations with ministerial aides, accompanied by threats of closure.’ (Singleton, 2015)

The-then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan-Smith, subsequently accused The Trussell Trust of scaremongering (Independent, 2013) and the ensuing Lobbying Act 2014 placed new restrictions on voluntary groups’ ability to campaign. Indeed, in Canada, tackling causes rather than symptoms is no longer considered a charitable purpose: ‘In Canada, the regulatory authority has ruled that Oxfam cannot have *prevention* of poverty as one of its charitable objectives, as the *alleviation* of poverty is what charity should be about’ (Independence Panel, 2015: 25, emphasis added).

But there is the danger that tackling symptoms becomes valorised. It promotes the longevity (and success) of voluntary groups (symptoms will persist if causes are not addressed), whereas resolving causes renders them vulnerable. This allows symptoms-tackling to become assimilated as the acceptable norm in the food poverty game, well

illustrated in a Sustainable Food Places advertisement of 5 October 2021: 'Brilliant jobs in food poverty in Wandsworth and Thanet'. Yeo (2017) also suggests that symptoms are easier to address than causes, commonly addressable by single-agency responses. Causes are commonly structural (therefore not easily resolved in the short term) and invariably require a multi-agency response. The 'difficulty' of addressing causes pushes agency responses back to tackling symptoms. In turn, this creates dependency (addressing symptoms does not remove the problem) (Reinert, 1994), exacerbating the causes or certainly, Ellis (2001) notes, reducing the urgency of resolving them.

Kim and Keil (2003) also assert that focusing on symptoms rather than causes can be because of a lack of willingness to *diagnose* the symptoms for fear of the consequences (in terms of either mitigation costs or identifying welfare losses). Ahn and Kalish (2000) suggest, too, that causes are easier to obfuscate. A common agency response is to dispute causes (particularly where there are several supposed causes and causation is hard to prove), in order to make the means of tackling them less certain, or to dispute the appropriate means of addressing them – do they require a policy response or behaviour change? 'Whether the problem is caused by oversight or by structural problems is fundamental to considering policy implications' (Yeo, 2017: 665).

Notwithstanding these complexities, in Lincolnshire, the churches have a visible role in advocacy for tackling the causes of food poverty rather than just its symptoms. In the county, they run a large proportion of the food banks. Their advocacy for tackling causes is undoubtedly facilitated by a degree of independence from state grant aid, but even in this context, the Church Urban Fund (2013) recognises that tackling causes is much more of a challenge, both practically and politically, than addressing symptoms.

Volunteering and risk shunting

Levels of risk in volunteer community food organisations are inherently high, not least because of the complex nature of decisions noted earlier, fragile resource profiles and being tied to state contracts. Risks also lie in the nature of the volunteer base where the skills can be variable. In Low et al's (2007) national study, for example, 78 per cent of volunteers were not interviewed before starting, 89 per cent had not had their references taken up and 81 per cent had not been provided with a role description. Despite this, risk taking is encouraged: 'We do need the voluntary sector to innovate ... We need to re-create freedom to fail. We've lost it. Risk management and minimisation dominates commissioning – and this destroys the freedom to fail and the capacity to innovate' (Osborne et al, 2008: 65–66). But, of course, 'freedom to fail' is a risk in itself.

I have experienced what Foucault (2008 [1977–78]) postulates – that risks in the voluntary sector are exacerbated because the state shunts the majority of risk down to citizen deliverers, to allow rewards and penalties to be administered. It also allows blame and risk to be shifted away from government: risk as 'blame management', as Taylor and Burt (2005) call it. In Lincolnshire, large sums of COVID-19 emergency support funding for food poverty were passed from the central state – the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – through the local state and into the voluntary sector, on the basis that it had the local knowledge to disperse it appropriately. Yet the contractual commitments placed on the voluntary sector required an accountability (and expertise) that did not realistically reflect the unprecedented, indeed unknown, situation in which the funding would be dispersed.

In the context of food, there is much exhortation to change food behaviours, globally (Eat-Lancet Commission, 2019) and nationally (Dimbleby, 2021), but many of the recommendations for implementation sit in the voluntary sector, where the risks of failure therefore also lie, and the resource base is the smallest. Volunteer deliverers are thus ‘responsibilised’ into accepting risk rather than being shielded from it by the state, and risk shunting does not, in the main, concomitantly shunt power (De Hoogh et al, 2005). Even within the voluntary sector, larger voluntary groups tend to shunt risk onto smaller ones (Hemmings, 2017).

But responsibilisation, of itself, increases risk. It encourages an increase in the number of rules and institutions by which responsibilisation might be identified and accounted. The more rules there are, the more likely they are to be breached (Alexander, 2010). Such rules, then, are invariably embedded into service-level contracts (Shiel and Breidenbach-Roe, 2014), coercing compliance as a risk avoidance strategy (Hemmings, 2017). Risk becomes measured as a failure to deliver contract terms, rather than a failure to improve human welfare.

This, suggests Rochester (2013), drives much risk taking ‘under the radar’. Larger voluntary groups might manage risk through rational knowledge-based processes (and shunting), but smaller organisations often rely more on ‘folk wisdom’ (Zinn, 2008) or ignore risk liability altogether. This can take some voluntary groups into ‘illicit’ activities, sometimes not being aware that they are illicit (or indeed illegal), as opposed to simply informal (reciprocal work support, barter and mutual aid) (Somerville et al, 2015).

Marketisation and volunteering

Responsibilisation, too, is very much part of the marketisation³ of voluntary sector organisations and institutions (Foucault, 2008 [1977–78]) and there are a range of views as to how this is manifest. Smith and Laurie (2011), for example, suggest that responsibilisation promotes individual autonomy and self-improvement through volunteering, and that these are very much part of the ‘neoliberalising’ characteristics of marketisation. At the same time, they suggest, volunteering exhibits ‘collective’ notions of mutual aid, philanthropy and solidarity.

Following the neoliberalisation element of this argument, Jayasuriya (2002) asserts that volunteering reduces dependency, improves social conduct and allows the identification of the ‘good citizen’. But seen in this way, claim Fougere et al (2017), volunteering is used to legitimate welfare withdrawal, replacing it with markets in the neoliberal tradition: market failures are seen as correctable by markets, albeit social ones. This obfuscates social ‘problems’, recharacterising them as individual problems with market solutions (Brown, 2006). Volunteering becomes ‘citizenship entrepreneurship’, conforming to the established norms of market competition (Mirowski, 2013).

Fougere et al (2017) also assert that ‘inclusive economies’ (where much volunteering in community food projects is situated) are framed in the same market economy discourse: inclusion can be achieved only through *economic* inclusion (for example, a job). Inclusion becomes an entrepreneurial discourse rather than a social one. To legitimate this, the voluntary sector becomes reinforced by tales of success and good practice, to engender feelings of empowerment and social agency. Delivering identifiable social benefit also reduces the need to question whether the voluntary sector is the best means of service delivery (Edward and Willmott, 2013). State funding

is then specifically monitored against state performance criteria, which buys voluntary sector loyalty, again reducing its powers of advocacy: 'As the state looks to the sector to deliver public services, feedback is increasingly unwelcome, with gagging clauses becoming more common' (Singleton, 2015, paragraph 6).

Bell and Gradus (2018) focus on the encroachment of marketisation into voluntary activity, where volunteering becomes seen as 'work'. Dean (2015) cites the National Coalition for Independent Action (2015: 9): 'Dominant ideas about volunteering have moved away from self-help, community development and campaigning to the "workplace model" that sees volunteers as unpaid workers.' This model reifies productivity at the expense of social purpose (Fredheim, 2018), inevitably exploiting volunteers and devaluing professionals. Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership's (2019: 9) Local Industrial Strategy even uses volunteering as one of its 'growth' anchors: 'Cumbria's excellence in the voluntary and community sector and the strong nature of many of our communities provides a real launching pad' for the strategy.

Dean (2015), too, suggests that volunteering has become more instrumental (improving a CV) and competitive (volunteering opportunities as part of university marketing) under marketisation. This has been observed in Lincolnshire where local education institutions require voluntary bodies to 'apply' for volunteers, by outlining what the benefits will be to the volunteer. One such institution promotes volunteering opportunities on its webpage thus: 'Taking advantage of the many opportunities on offer makes your CV look even better.' Two of the 'many opportunities' are instanced: giving back and having fun. This, says Dean (2015), focuses on the individual, and occludes altruism: volunteering becomes a consumer good, subject to audit. Handy et al's (2010) international study confirms student CV improvement as the main motive for volunteering and that a minimum of volunteering takes place to achieve this. Musick et al (2000) suggest that this minimises intrinsic volunteer benefits and discourages more altruistic volunteering (giving back) in later life.

Community food and marketisation

Rosol (2016) discusses *for whom* volunteering might or might not constitute marketisation in the context of community food gardening. Like Smith and Laurie (2011), she observes volunteering to be both empowering for the citizen and, at the same time, about the state imposition of 'civic engagement' (Milligan, 2007).

Rosol (2016) notes that food community gardening has complex characteristics. It generates individual satisfaction and promotes self-reliance, while simultaneously providing a public service (amenity space), promoting active citizenship independent of the state and producing food market goods. (Some of it is 'deviant' – so-called 'guerrilla gardening' – and some furthers public policy through outsourcing.) Here, communities become involved in the privatisation of services, even though their objectives might be quite different.

But community gardening also portrays strong community cohesion, leads to environmental and health benefits and has positive gender and ethnic impacts (Buckingham, 2005). Some even characterise food community gardens as antithetic to neoliberal urban development politics and globally controlled food systems (Lebuhn, 2008).

Rosol (2012) finds that the local state encourages community garden volunteering explicitly to ameliorate public finance shortages, seeking to replace them with 'civic

engagement' and taking 'self-responsibility' for local community spaces. But the motivations of volunteers do not accord with this.

In her studies, 'having fun' and conviviality were, in order, the two most important reasons for volunteering. Environmental improvement was the third, and safe spaces for children, the fourth. Only a small number felt a sense of responsibility in doing, or an obligation to do, the work. The role of the local state had little relevance to volunteer motivations, save that it would reimburse expenses and not 'interfere'. This can be seen as empowering, running counter to state neoliberalisation motivations.

Ultimately, the power of the volunteer is that they are not beholden to anyone, and they can stop volunteering at any time. They are not harnessed into an exchange market. In Rosol's (2012) study, volunteers would do only what they wanted to do – if they perceived that they were 'cheap labour', for example, they would stop. But she does acknowledge that many of her volunteer participants had the 'privilege of the middle class' (2012: 250) and the actions of other groups might not be so self-determined, particularly, in my experience, in food poverty volunteering.

In these 'middle-class' circumstances, volunteer community food gardening can become a process of 'gentrification' (Porter and Shaw, 2009), but for other groups, volunteering can become a process of conscription. The UK government's Help to Work scheme from 2014, for example, *requires* long-term unemployed people to work unpaid for 30 hours a week as 'volunteers' (Independence Panel, 2015: 28).

(Food) volunteering and the policy context

In my experience as a 'new' volunteer in community food projects, I appeared to be offering support largely to correct failures of some sort – of markets, policies and ideologies. The consequences of these failures impact most, for community food, in the areas of distributional equity and of justice. This is not a new insight, but it does help to explain why decision making can be necessarily complex, often subject to compromise and, on occasion, just plain wrong.

The state is pleased that the third sector takes on these burdens and risks. The National Audit Office (2020) says the state should use us (third sector volunteers) because we can reach the people that the public sector 'wants to reach' (but presumably cannot) and we can deliver outcomes 'that the public sector finds it hard to deliver on its own'. This feels to me like risk shunting.

As volunteers we do this, says the National Audit Office, without any interest in profit, and are good at reinvesting back into solving social problems. We are innovative and offer good (cost effective, cheap, free?) performance. This feels to me like marketisation. The National Audit Office document describes advantages for the state of volunteering, which encapsulate well, at the same time, the problems of volunteering, for volunteers.

Conclusions: implications for practical action

Because volunteers are policy (and institutions) takers rather than policy makers, on the face of it, there is little that they can do themselves to change these circumstances. But volunteers can work with policies and institutions to some

purpose (as to whether we should or not I have, as yet, no answer). Within marketisation, for example, social economy principles (circular economies, sharing economies, inclusive economies and place-based development) specifically address market failures and issues of distributional equity and food justice – in contrast to market (growth) economies.

These approaches are also founded on a systems approach to development (rather than enterprises and sectors), which focuses on securing benefits across a broad range of activity, collectively. Such approaches allow, too, the buttressing of food activity with non-food activity (for example, addressing a number of deprivations simultaneously), which facilitates the spreading of risk.

These principles have sought to be applied through a volunteer community food framework in Lincolnshire by working within the strategic frame of the county's social economy strategy ([Bishop Grosseteste University, 2021](#)), which also offers a number of practical mechanisms by which voluntary bodies can use the market to 'soften' it. Repurposing waste food for community resale provides independent funding for voluntary food effort. This has been done by creating a waste food cafe in Lincoln. Converting capital costs into revenue streams for volunteering has also been used: state grants for renewable energy convert to energy revenue costs for use in the voluntary food sector ([Curry, 2022](#)). Experimenting with several mediums of exchange (pay as you feel, gifting, pay it forward, donations boxes and sponsorship – all used in the waste food cafe) can be revenue generating and redistributive at the same time.

Elsewhere, cross-subsidisation has been deployed, too. Stroudco, a food hub in Stroud, UK, for example, while selling food at premium prices, has cross-subsidised improvements in nutrition in low-income communities ([Franklin et al, 2011](#)). And crowdfunding provides independent resources for volunteering ([Nekmat and Ng, 2019](#)), less regressively than National Lottery funds ([House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, 2000](#)). All of these also provide state-independent resources. Such independence increases the potential for voluntary sector advocacy to push for tackling the causes rather than symptoms of food market failures. And we should always be mindful, and be reminded of, the critical difference between the symptoms and the causes surrounding such market failures.

Notes

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the community food domain is considered to be where voluntary organisations seek to address a range of food market failures relating to environmental impact, health, poverty, food security and food justice.

² This quote has been attributed to Desmond Tutu, but there is no evidence that he ever used these words exactly. The issue is discussed in [McKinlay \(2019\)](#).

³ This is one of several terms used to describe an economic approach that favours free trade, low taxes, low regulation and low government spending and intervention ([Reinert, 1994](#)). Neoliberalisation is also a commonly used term but is critiqued for its loose and ill-defined use in academic literature ([Dunn, 2017](#)). Both of these terms are used here to represent their use in the literature. For a full discussion of the terms, see [Boas and Gans-Morse \(2009\)](#).

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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