

Productive ageing: voluntary action by older people

"Trees grow stronger over the years, rivers wider. Likewise, with age, human beings gain immeasurable depth and breadth of experience and wisdom. That is why older persons should be not only respected and revered; they should be utilized as the rich resource to society that they are." -United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan

The "grey cloud" on the horizon today - the rapidly ageing population feared by the doom-and-gloom crowd - has several silver linings that have too long gone unnoticed, under-appreciated and under-utilized. One of these is the contribution of voluntary work by older persons, those who choose and who are able to remain active and productive members of society. Volunteering by older persons is a singular and particularly valuable mode of "productive ageing", because their contribution is the gift of life experience, skill, wisdom and human warmth to other generations.

Uncounted contributions

There is a great deal of literature on the subject of ageing, but much of it does a disservice to older persons and to their societies: it neglects, or addresses only in passing, the changing ways that older people engage in society. Short shrift is given to the wealth of knowledge, expertise, skill and wisdom that is available to educate and inform younger generations. And this lack of attention does nothing to support the development of public policies that would encourage and facilitate the fullest participation of older people in society.

The traditional way of viewing the contribution of older people to society through their voluntary action is that, because older people are the most rapidly growing segment of the population in many parts of the world, they constitute a major resource waiting to be tapped. Indeed, older people fill gaps that the state and the market are unable or unwilling to fill; and they provide precious expertise, networks and knowledge to many organizations that otherwise could not function so well. Let us not forget the volunteers who didn't volunteer; who, because of unexpected illness and death - perhaps from HIV/AIDS - were thrust into the role of unpaid caregivers and find themselves giving again, at time of life when they may have expected to be receiving care and support, or just enjoying their later years.

Many traditional cultures still regard their elders as authoritative decision-makers and a valuable source of counselling and wisdom. But much of modern society, enamoured with the beauty of youth, the flash of high tech, and material recognition and gain, seems to have forgotten the value of the dimension of accumulated experience and knowledge. Today, the pervasive lack of accurate information on their contribution fuels the stereotyping of older people, as unproductive, dependent and subject to irreversible decline. It is time to shatter this myth.

There is an additional way of viewing the contribution of voluntary action by older people - in terms of the benefits to themselves. Voluntary work is a valuable, productive way for older people to stay engaged with society, to use their expertise and to maintain

and nourish their sense of purpose, their innate value, and their self-respect. Such involvement and self-value naturally results in more independence, health and well-being for older people.

Giving a little, getting a little

An important concept of all voluntary work is that it is reciprocal: you give something, and you get something back - often in addition to the self-satisfaction and pleasure to be had. Young people who volunteer gain because they become more employable. Working adults who volunteer gain status in their communities. And older people who volunteer gain healthy years of life, as has been amply demonstrated: older people who stay actively engaged live longer and live better; their lives are healthier than ever before, and they are more often than not more knowledgeable. Orphaned or abandoned children that benefit from human warmth received from older volunteers - when there are far too few younger hands available - are children who are much more likely to give back to society in their time.

Voluntary work as "social security" insurance

People who freely help others in need more often than not receive help when they themselves are in need. In many developing countries, the practice of voluntary work as insurance is widespread - in the form of mutual aid and self-help. It can be thought of as a "deposit" in a "social security" system, one that will pay out as a first line of defence against poverty and vulnerability. Older people, investing their own work voluntarily, are managing their future risk and, at the same time, promoting their own development.

Today, it is normal for four to five generations to co-exist, with two of those generations at or beyond retirement age. This situation, typical of today's ageing world, is unprecedented in human history. It is a valuable opportunity for volunteer work between and among generations to give to societies, and it is an opportunity to recognize the lifelong volunteer work given by women to their families and communities, which so far has not been recognized.

Very often when older people wish to volunteer, they face barriers and obstacles that prevent them from doing so. In formal service volunteering, they may encounter "ageism" and prejudice on the part of organizations, who may limit them to working with other older persons or who may completely restrict their involvement. Older people are also hampered by a lack of information about opportunities to volunteer, and difficulties in physical access to such opportunities, due to economic and other factors. Thus, society deprives itself of a needed and useful contribution.

Older volunteers - the solution, not the problem

A basic shift in society's perception of older people is long overdue. They are too often mistakenly seen as needing help themselves rather than as potential problem solvers of both their own problems and problems in the community. Resources are often not channelled to them, or to initiatives run by them. Much could be gained by simply providing them with a social infrastructure and some finance for mutual support activities or for any other activities that would allow them to join forces, to plan collectively with

other generations, and to link up with external agencies - including for seeking employment or credit.

Global recognition

In 2000, the United Nations Commission for Social Development considered various ways in which governments and the United Nations could support volunteering. Several governments stressed the need to reflect the concerns of older people and their contribution to society through voluntary action, and asked that the issue figure more prominently in the Second World Assembly on Ageing.

The potential contribution of older people reaches far beyond a social role: they can be the promoters of key United Nations goals such as human rights, environment protection, health and peace. They can instil either hatred or peace in their descendants, and thus exert a powerful influence over the way conflict is seen by their family, their society and their nation.

Taken together, the discussions on volunteering that will take place at the World Assembly will provide an excellent opportunity for giving greater attention to the subject.

This article was based on information provided by UN Volunteers.

Courtesy: <http://www.un.org/ageing/prkit/productiveageing.htm>