

IS THE SPIRIT OF VOLUNTEERISM DEAD? AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Volunteerism normally is associated with the act of being sincere, compassionate, and kindness in which a person does towards other people and the environment. Volunteerism allows people to be selfless and willing to puts the needs of others before one's own. They would not think twice about sharing what they have with other people who are in desperate need. Whenever there are tragedies which is beyond the help, either from the government or any existing institutions, the volunteer people will come forward and offering all the necessary assistance they can offered. The spirit of volunteerism also arises when there are no actual tragedies like volunteering in assisting for instances the poor, weak, and needy in the society. Most of the volunteer activities carried out sincerely, without having the request or hope getting anything in return. Sadly, there are people or group of people who carry out the volunteer activities with the hope to get something in return. Such mind set with other arising issues can become a major obstacle in exercising the act of voluntarism in its true sense. As such, the paper aims to analyse the philosophical idea over the concept of volunteerism, its aims, types, and its status, internationally and nationally. The paper also discusses also the arising issues on volunteerism, as well as identifying steps to bring back the true spirit of volunteerism which been seen eroded in the modern society by using the methodology from both primary and secondary sources like books, articles, and examples over the act of volunteerism. Finding over the research will reveal the arising concern over the spirit of volunteerism and identifying ways to bring back such spirit.

Keywords: *Volunteerism, compassionate, kindness, spirit, society.*

INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism is one of the most important aspects of life. It would be very difficult to imagine any society could exist without having anyone within the society

to carry out the act of volunteerism. The word volunteerism come from the root word volunteer which means or very much synonyms with the word offering, undertaking, agreeing, and others to do or

to perform something without having the need to give something back in return. The act of volunteering is generally considered as a noble activity where an individual or group of individual provides services for no financial return or getting social gain with the objective to bring benefit other person, group or organization. (Nazilah Ali, 2014). Volunteering is also renowned for skill development and is often intended to promote the spirit of goodness with the hope to improve human quality of life, animal well – being, and the environmental protection (John Wilson, 2000).

Usually, the act of volunteering brings positive benefits for the volunteer individual themselves as well as for the person or the community they served. According to some study, the act of volunteering can easily connect us to others, volunteering activities good for our mind and body, volunteering can advance our career, and volunteering can even bring fun and fulfilment to our life (Muhamad Ismail Ahmad, 2009; Jeanne Segal & Lawrence Robinson, 2019).

Many volunteers are specifically trained in the areas they work, such as medicine, education, or emergency rescue. Others serve on needed basis, such as in response to a natural disaster or during emergency. The bottom line is that volunteerism normally been associated with the idea of goodness, compassionate, kindness, sympathetic, gentleness, caring, benevolence, thoughtfulness, and others.

On record, the word volunteerism or volunteering was first recorded in 1755. It was derived from the noun volunteer -that means “one who offers himself for military service”. The word - come from the Middle French word of *voluntaire* (Douglas Harper, 2019). In the non – military sense, the word was first recorded during the 1630s (Douglas Harper, 2019).

In a military context, a volunteer army is a military body whose soldiers chose to enter service, as opposed to having been conscripted. Such volunteers do not work for free and are often been given regular pay, allowances, or salary. As such, it is clear to us that the act of volunteerism often been associated with military services.

This is not shocking to us because people in the past often go to war and battle to defend their country. They cannot simply put their total reliance to the country existing army to do the job of defending the nation. The government often invites common people or ordinary citizen to become volunteer army to defend their nation. As a result of the call made by the government, many people come forward and volunteer themselves to defend their country along with the army.

The example of volunteer army can be seen during the Russian Revolution in 1917. The Russian Volunteer Army which often being known as the White Army were active in Southern Russia during the Russian Civil War which started from 1917 and ended in 1920. The Volunteer Army fought against Bolshevik forces which wanted to create a communist state in Russia upon the fall of the Russian monarchy which has rule Russia for the last three hundred years.

The Russian Volunteer Army has been fought with the Bolshevik in the Southern Front and the Ukrainian War of Independence. In 1919 it was made part of the Armed Forces of South Russia, becoming the largest force of the White movement until it was merged with the Army of Wrangel in March 1920. Initially volunteers in the Russian Volunteer Army received no salaries, only rations. This, however, soon changed. Thus, officers were initially paid 100 Russian rubles a month, and in March 1918, their monthly pay was increased to 270 Russian rubles (Evgenii Vladimirovich Volkov, 2014).

Historically, the act of volunteerism has existed for the last hundred or even thousands of years. It could have existed when God first created human being itself. This is due to the fact that act of volunteerism very much synonym with the act of kindness and goodness which is something existed within the mind and heart of any reasonable human being, people in the past can be presumed to have carry out the act of volunteerism towards other people, animals as well as to the environment. Such act of selfless has also existed in the Malaysian culture and custom.

Often, we heard stories from the older generation like from our parent and grandparent about the important to do something good towards other people, animal and environment without hoping to get something in return. Such act of being selfless had been taught to the children from one generation to another generation. If we encountered anyone who need any help, we will put aside all differences we might have and will try our very best to assist such person. Same goes with animal.

Many of us -had been brought up in the environment which encourage us to do kindness towards animals. We must not do anything which can bring harm to the animals and we also been encouraged to offer any possible help to any kind of animal which are in need. Even to the extent of offering such help to animal which could bring potential harm or even death to us like snake and shark (Jennifer Earl, January 14, 2019; Shark Conservation Volunteer, 2019).

Many of us also has brought up in the society which encourage us to do good to nature and to the environment. As children, we often being told by adult not to do anything which can bring any harm or destroyed the environment. All the above-mentioned value has been taught to us either by way of formal teaching like through proper education in

school or through informal teaching like common advice given by parent to their children or grandparent to their grandchildren.

Whatever it is, most children in almost all societies has been trained at a very young age to be responsible and caring to themselves as well as to their surroundings. Such training indirectly has exposed the children to the idea of volunteerism. As the young children grow older, such spirit of volunteerism has been deeply embodied in their heart and mind and when the need arises, they themselves will carry out and perform the act of volunteerism towards other people, animals and environment out of nobility and kindness.

Being subject oneself to any of act of volunteerism means the person willing to spend a lot of time, energy and even money to do something which will make a change in the society towards better good. Only a person who has a noble and strong heart is willing to perform such act of volunteerism. The ultimate aim of the act of volunteerism is to do good to other people, animals or even environment. However, we should not be so naïve on this point. There is certain individual, groups, or even government out there who are calling or even sponsoring volunteerism in order to do harm to others.

This normally happen because of politics, religious and racial tension between groups, as well the being subject to the idea of selfishness to themselves, to their own people and to their own country. The spirit of volunteerism should have not been associated to any act of doing crime or harm to others. Protecting oneself, their own community and their own nation does not mean that we should call people to volunteer to commits atrocity, genocide or mass killing to other people.

Any act of volunteerism should be made for the sake of bring happiness and provides safety and security to the

people. The acts of volunteerism should be set up or called upon in order to improve the quality condition of the society and the environment we are living in. For examples eliminating illiteracy within the society, providing education to certain target group of peoples like children and youth, teaching people languages or teaches people basic skills, provide certain kind of educational as well as awareness activities and programs which can bring significant benefit to the society especially to women and youth.

It can also be to provide assistance to migrant people, provide counselling to people who are in need, caring for elderly, disabled or sick people and to their families, providing assistance by maintaining day care centres or institutions for elderly, disabled or sick people.

Providing any volunteer act which can strengthen the country national security and the nation stability, providing necessary assistance for people who has become victim of illegal substance abuse like drug, alcohol or cigarette, providing necessary assistance to young children and juvenile who have been facing with social problems, provide necessary assistance to the homeless people, providing necessary assistance to people or family or are in need like single parent or family which facing severe problems, providing necessary assistance to the prisoners, providing necessary assistance to incompetent individual, providing necessary assistance and support to victims of crimes or any wrongdoing like victim of domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, providing necessary assistance in case of emergency like natural disasters, as well as conducting any activities or programs which can improve the quality of life in the society, the environment we are living in and protection of the animals.

All the mentioned examples of volunteerism can be carried out in several ways like through volunteering programs conducted by schools or institution of higher learning. Many schools and institutional of higher learning offer service – learning programs, which allow students to serve the community through volunteering activities while earning educational credit.

According to Alexander Astin in the foreword to *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* by Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, Jr., "...we promote more wide – spread adoption of service – learning in higher education because we see it as a powerful means of preparing students to become more caring and responsible parents and citizens and of helping colleges and universities to make good on their pledge to serve society" (Janet Eyler, 1999).

The act of volunteering can also be performed traditionally by way of taking own initiative to carry out any act of volunteerism for the society and for the environment. This classic approach often been utilized by a person due to the fact that it much easier and do not involve much procedural process if it were to be carry out by agencies or intuitions.

Examples for this kind of act of volunteerism include providing care for those who are in need, providing any possible assistance to those who need it, providing protection and safety for animals, protecting the environment in any possible way, and others. There is also virtual or online volunteering. The world – wide – web has made geographical boundary non – existent in many respects in today's world.

Online volunteering makes it possible to volunteer for different organisations in different countries from our home or office. It can also be done at any time according to our convenience. Projects may involve helping with social media, website or designing some material, mentoring youth, proof –

reading articles, translations, and others (United Nations Volunteer, 2019).

There is also environmental volunteering. Environmental volunteering refers to act of who contribute towards environmental management, conservation or protection. Volunteers conduct in such situation includes a range of activities including environmental monitoring, ecological restoration such as re-vegetation and weed removal, protecting endangered animals, and educating others about the natural environment (Environmental Volunteer Work, 2009).

The act of volunteerism can also become essential during emergency time. During emergency, volunteering often plays a pivotal role in the recovery effort following natural disasters, such as tsunamis, flash floods, droughts, hurricanes, and earthquakes. For example, the 1995 Great Hanshin – Awaji earthquake in Japan was a watershed moment, bringing in many first-time volunteers for earthquake response.

The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami has also attracted a large number of volunteers worldwide, deployed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies, and the United Nations (UN) (Azman Zainonabidin, 2008).

Private citizen has also come forward to volunteer and offer possible assistance to the victims of the natural disaster. If we still recalled, the 2014 flash flood tragedy which the severely effect the life of the people in the East Coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu has create a wave of act of volunteerism among concern individual, groups, agencies and institution throughout the country (Ahmad Firdaus Dzulkarnain, 2014).

There are also increasing number of companies who are providing platform for their workers to do volunteering act. (Ben Darlington, 2016). A majority of the

companies particularly in the West allow their employees to volunteer after office hour as well as during work hours. Some companies have introduced and implemented the Employee Volunteering Programs (EVPs), also called Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV) which been regarded as a part of the companies' sustainability efforts and their social responsibility activities. The act of volunteerism can also be performed through community service. This kind of activity commonly been done to improve the life of the surrounding community (Mark Winfield, 2013).

VOLUNTEERISM AT INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL

Due to the significance benefits which the act of volunteerism can bring to the society and to the surrounding environment, much attention has been given towards it lately. International bodies including countries all over the world has started to give their priority towards this matter and encourage their citizen to carry out such act in any possible way.

The United Nations (UN), which is the most important international agency has even given their support and encouragement to the idea of volunteerism. The UN has created the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program which has for the last many years contributed to the world peace and stability through the act of volunteerism.

The UN has regarded volunteerism as a powerful means and tool of engaging people in tackling with development challenges, and it can transform the pace and nature of development. The UN sees the act of volunteerism as important tool which can bring huge benefits to both societies at large and to the individual volunteer by strengthening trust, solidarity and reciprocity among citizens, and by purposefully creating opportunities for participation.

At the same time the act of volunteerism can also create a world with better environment where all creatures can live. UNV contributes the world peace and progress by advocating for recognition of volunteers, working with partners to integrate volunteerism into development programming, and mobilizing an increasing number and diversity of volunteers, including experienced UN volunteers, throughout the world. UNV embraces volunteerism as universal and inclusive and recognizes volunteerism in its diversity as well as the values that sustain it, free will, commitment, engagement and solidarity (United Nations Volunteer, 2019).

In light with the recognition given by the international community over the issue concerning volunteerism, a special day has been set to commemorate the importance of volunteerism. The International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social Development more commonly referred to as International Volunteer Day (IVD) is being celebrated every year on 5 of December. IVD is a mandated given by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

This special day is viewed as a unique chance for volunteers and organizations all around the world to celebrate all their efforts, to share their values, and to promote their work among their communities, non – governmental organizations (NGOs), other UN agencies, government authorities as well as the private sectors. In 2018, the IVD has been celebrated all over the world with the theme of “Volunteers build Resilient Communities”.

Such theme has been selected in order to appreciate and celebrate volunteer efforts that strengthen local ownership and the resilience of the community in the face of natural disasters, economic stresses and political shocks. The event which was held on December 5, 2018 has focussed on how volunteers can build resilient

communities in facing with many local and global challenges. (International Volunteer Day (IVD), 2019).

In Malaysia, the issue of volunteerism is not something which is uncommon. The Malaysian society has been exposed with this concept since they were children. As mentioned earlier, many Malaysian children been taught by their family to do any activities which can bring good not only to themselves but also to other people. Such matter has also been stressed upon to the children in school. Often teachers try their very best to teach their students to become more useful member to the society and one way of being useful is by performing the act of volunteerism.

As such, the issue concerning volunteerism is not something which unheard of in Malaysia. Many people in the country carry out or perform volunteerism in their own way either privately, through non – governmental organizations (NGOs), or governmental agencies. From time to time, advertisement normally been published by any agencies or institutions in the country inviting Malaysian from all walk of life to participate and perform the act of volunteerism.

The role played by the Malaysian non – governmental organizations (NGOs) on this issue is also undeniable. Malaysian has been blessed to have many social activists and NGOs that willing to assist them in time of crisis. There are hundreds of social activists and NGOs in the country which focus on helping the Malaysian society to deal with many social issues especially issues which impact the poor, the needy and the weak like women, single mother, the homeless, and youth.

There even social activists and NGOs which offering assistance to abandon babies. Social activist volunteers also work on rights of the people based on basic human and women’s rights. Using these principles, they have provided legal support to people who are

not aware to reclaim their rights. These social activist volunteers join NGOs that enable them to support women, children and people with disability. They create awareness and empower these people in the workplaces and communities.

Among all the notable volunteer agencies in the country, the most widely known by Malaysian public are like the Neighbourhood Watch (In Malay language known as Rukun Tetangga). The Neighbourhood watch is a voluntary programme aimed to assist the community development in Malaysia. An Act was legislated in Parliament and effective June 22, 2012 is known as the Neighbourhood Watch Act 2012 and comprises acts relating to Neighbourhood Watch and Voluntary Patrol Scheme (SRS).

The Neighbourhood Watch is a volunteer committee under the supervision of the Department of National Unity and Integration, Prime Minister Department. The establishment of it focuses on residential areas in the city, suburbs and high-risk areas. The main role of the Neighbourhood Watch is to organise groups for patrol duty at night to reduce crime in surrounding neighbourhoods. Members of the patrol group usually consist of community members in the neighbourhoods. (Neighborhood Watch, 2019).

Besides that, Malaysia also has Volunteer Corps Department or commonly known as RELA supervised by the Malaysian Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA). Historically, the development of Malaysian Volunteer Corps Department (RELA) is closely related to that of the Home Guards established by the British Colonial to protect local security during the emergency period facing with the communist and terrorist insurgent in the country declared in 1948 up until its disbandment at the end of the emergency on July 31, 1960.

On June 22, 2012, RELA was rebranded and renaming as the Malaysian

Volunteer Corps pursuant to the Malaysian Volunteer Corps Act 2012 [Act 752]. Starting from August 28, 2013, RELA was upgraded to a federal department known as the Malaysian Volunteer Corps Department (RELA) (Volunteers Department of Malaysia, 2019). For the last many years, both the Neighbourhood watch and RELA has played a very important role in performing their duties as the country main volunteer agencies protecting the nation stability and peace.

One of the most notable and largest humanitarian organizations in the world which utilizes volunteers to support its movement is the Red Cross or Red Crescent movement. The Red Cross or Red Crescent movement can be found globally and nationally. Inspired in 1959, by business man Henri Dunant, who was upset by the suffering of men on both sides of the Battle of Solferino, provided humanitarian aid to these soldiers. The Red Cross was started in 1963 by Henry Dunant, a Swiss and five men who set up the International Committee for Relief to the wounded.

This committee later became the International Committee of the Red Cross, whose emblem was a red cross on a white background, the inverse of the Swiss flag as a tribute to Dunant, a Swiss. The Russo-Turkish War from 1876 to 1878, the Ottoman Empire used the Red Crescent instead of the Red Cross because the government feared that the Cross would alienate its Muslim soldiers. The Red Crescent was formally recognized in 1929 when the Geneva Conventions (Article 19) was amended. The flag of both the Red Cross and Red Crescent is a symbol of protection during the war.

The Malaysian Red Cross Society (MRCS) was set up as a Branch of the British Red Cross Society. The MRCS was incorporated under an Act of Parliament namely under the Malaysian Red Cross Society (Incorporation) Act 1965 [Act 540]. In 1975 via Act 540, changed the

name of the Society to be known as the Malaysian Red Crescent Society (MRCS). Act 540 was last revised in 1995.

The function of the MRCS is to be a support organization, auxiliary to the Malaysian Government in the humanitarian field. The MRCS members are comprised of volunteers who work at times of disasters, providing food through mass-cooking to people who are displaced during the disasters. All these members volunteer their time to help on pro – bono basis. As a volunteer member, they are committed to serve as and when duty calls and not on a ‘when I am free basis’. Sadly, this form of voluntarism is not seemed much nowadays.

ARISING ISSUES ON VOLUNTEERISM

Similar with other topics, volunteerism also has been subjected to many challenges, controversies and problems. One question which often being highlighted is concerning the spirit of volunteerism itself. The word volunteerism derived from the word volunteer means doing or performing any act or duty sincerely without requesting or hoping to get anything in return.

As time change and society begin to progress, such basic idea on volunteerism has been put into question by many. There is individual which demand certain things in return for the volunteer duty which being carry out by them. This problem been seen started way back in school, where students are being requested to involve with volunteer activities so that it can add up as extra marks alongside with their academic performance. Similar issue also has been faced by students when they want to proceed their education at the higher level in the universities.

Often, we heard about the universities put additional requirements beside academic performance before accepting any students to proceed with their further study in the university. Such additional requirement can come from

the student extra co – curriculum activities including any acts of volunteerism which have been undertaken by the student before joining the university. Due this matter, some of the student perform volunteer duty not because they really want to do it but because of other factors.

The issue concerning sincerity over performing volunteerism also being face by adult. Some workplace added volunteerism as part of the requirement for promotion. As a result of this, many only perform doing volunteer duty in order to fulfil office promotion requirement. Beside this issue, there are also anxiousness on part of the society that some volunteer activities or programs been subjected to political influenced.

Some people concern that some volunteer activities and programs being use as a tool to spread any political influence. As a result, to this concern, many begin to stay away from getting involve with any volunteer activities and programs which being organized.

All the (above) mentioned could certainly jeopardize the original aim and objective volunteerism. People will no longer want to get involve with any volunteer activities and program unless if the activities and programs benefit them directly. There are also people who do not want to be used by a politician to do such volunteer works which would add to the politician political advantage. If this matter has not been properly addressed, the true spirit of volunteerism will become effected and in time will become dead. If the true spirit of volunteerism is dead, it can bring negative effects to the society, animals and the environment.

Finally, one of the basic challenges to be a true volunteer is the fact of social – economic means of the person. When society has to manage with B40 and M40 (the low and medium communities) the people from these communities need to work for survival. Hence, even though

these group of people would like to be a volunteer, they may not be able to do so. This in turn could possibly connect them to be a “paid volunteer” for other unscrupulous means as mentioned earlier.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It will be a very difficult task to bring back or to create the true spirit of volunteerism. The idea over the true spirit of volunteerism is normally be carry out based on the pure heart and good soul. If a person started to demand so many things in return for all the volunteer act they perform, in time there will be fewer people who wanted to get involve with the volunteer duty. The best solutions which can done to deal with this issue is by way of education. Educational process is the most important tool which can used by us to create an awareness in the society on the important for getting involve with volunteerism.

All existing institutions in the country must play their role on this aspect and inform the public about the importance of getting involved with volunteer activities and programs and the types of volunteer activities and programs which they can get involve with. Children in school must be continued to be exposed with the idea and spirit of volunteerism. Teachers should encourage their pupils to perform voluntarily acts anytime and anywhere without hoping to have anything in return. Ensuring all stratas of society has an income to support them and their family may encourage adult volunteers.

The non-governmental organizations (NGOs) along with the government must play their role as well to educate and creating awareness among the public over the issue concerning volunteerism. Any volunteer activities and programs should never be allowed to become a political tool by anyone especially by the politician. Politician should never take advantage over all the

works being done under the heading of volunteerism. If we want to stay as a strong and progress society, we must try our best to encourage our people to get involve with volunteer activities and programs.

It is not difficult and expensive to perform volunteer activity. If anybody wish to be a volunteer, they can start by volunteering within the family. Assist the people who are in need of support for example taking the elderly for medical checkups, shopping or taking care of their medical and other needs at home.

Volunteer activities can also be done in school, college or university by setting up or introducing classes for the needy community. On a societal level, people can volunteer with any various non – governmental organizations (NGOs) that serves community.

CONCLUSION

Beyond doubt, volunteerism is important aspect of our life. Our life is not complete without having anyone to perform the act of volunteerism. The act of volunteerism cannot be force and should not be done in order to get something in return. The act of volunteerism should also not be subjected to politics as well.

It is very difficult to measure volunteerism, as such it is not proper for any organization to use volunteerism as an instrumental measurement for anyone. Everybody needs to re-examine the requirement for having volunteerism as an instrumental measurement.

If we started to measure volunteer activity, then the true spirit of volunteerism will come to the end. If we want to bring back the true spirit of volunteerism, the act of volunteerism should come sincerely come from the heart and be carry out for the sake of humanity.

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