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tel: +27 (0)11 486 0245 fax: +27 (0)11 486 0275
23 Marico Road Emmarentia
P O Box 85535 Emmarentia 2029
email: conference@vosesa.org.za
website: <http://www.vosesa.org.za/sadccconference>

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Volunteering, Civic Agency and Citizenship: Some preliminary considerations

Concept paper prepared by
Ebenezer Obadare¹
obadare@ku.edu

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¹ Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA



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Abstract

These reflections have been provoked by the global resurgence of interest in volunteerism as a vehicle for civic renewal and societal revitalisation. This interest, it is claimed, is inflamed partly by a number of assumptions about volunteerism, and its relation to civil society, citizenship, development, and social integration. I take issue with these assumptions, while continuing to defend the inherent goodness of volunteerism, broadly understood (both in its formal and informal modes) as un-monetised service in the cause of the social. The basic aim is to trouble volunteerism with a view to interjecting a much needed clarity about its possibilities and limitations. For proper perspective, these reflections are set in a global context, although the provocations which I put forward are orientated at African issues and problems. First, the paper engages with the state, which, in a growing number of cases, has championed the cause of volunteerism. While noting that there is nothing inherently wrong with this, the paper recognises the danger of a pattern in which 'public' 'service' provision and delivery are constructed as a problem of inadequate volunteering, and thereby downloaded on the fragile shoulders of an already beleaguered civil society. As a corrective, the paper proposes a more searching interrogation of the state against the background of the transformations wrought by a rapidly changing global economic order. Moreover, because the call to volunteerism is often framed in a way that might lead one to imagine that there is no friction between state and civil society, it suggests an insinuation of social conflict into the discourse of volunteerism, to counter the statist narrative which tends to place the burden of societal regeneration on civil society. Furthermore, because volunteerism is a civic act, one that, ideally, is driven by a volunteer's sense of 'belonging' within a particular civic community, the paper urges an approach to volunteerism as an act of social citizenship that is best 'performed' when the state has paid its dues to society. It is argued that this dialogic understanding of volunteering as something socially situated is underemphasised in the volunteerism literature. Finally, the paper addresses youth angst and speculates on the meaning of volunteerism to a social demographic suffering profound alienation. It considers transformations in the nature of volunteerism, particularly what appears like an incipient professionalisation, as more and more young people are inclined to see volunteerism as a coping strategy.

1 Overview

On the back of renewed global faith in the voluntary sector as a putative conduit for civic renewal, volunteerism has made a notable return to the hub of policy and scholarly debates. Often times, the advocacy of volunteerism has been as intriguing as the very quarters from which it has issued. An illustration: British Prime Minister David Cameron's solution to the wave of 'recreational rioting' which lashed London and other parts of the United Kingdom in the summer of 2011 is a proposal for a national citizens service programme to be made available to young people of sixteen years and above. Driven apparently by his diagnosis of the riots as evidence of Britain's "slow-motion moral collapse," Cameron desires a return to "old-fashioned" values like "teamwork, discipline, duty" and "decency". Hence the proposal of a national service program, seen as an integral part of what he refers to as the British government's "social fight back" (all quotations from Stratton, 2011).

David Cameron's determination to mount a social fight back- indeed, to get Britain working under the umbrella of 'The Big Society'- is subtly ironic, coming almost twenty-five years after another conservative ruler, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's reassurance in 1987 that "And, as you know, there is no such thing as society". The current conservative government, it seems, is not merely acknowledging that society actually exists; it thinks it ought to be made bigger, and is convinced that volunteering and service-learning can help realise this objective.

Ordinarily, this should be music to the ears of all long-standing protagonists of volunteerism and civic service. After all, what can be more soothing than the voice of the leader of a major Western nation touting the benefits of civic service as a panacea for social demoralisation? Furthermore, what is there to lose since, at the very least, David Cameron's advocacy will only spark a public debate about the utility and outcomes of volunteerism?

My purpose in these brief reflections is to use the foregoing as a springboard for a searching interrogation of the socio-economic and political context of what might be called 'the global (re)turn to volunteering.' I think an awareness of this context is critical as a way of deepening our understanding of what volunteering is for, and how it interfaces with democracy, civil society, and development, particularly in African countries.

To this end, it is important to be attentive to, first, the character and agency of the state. In a majority of cases (the British case being an excellent example), the case for volunteering has been vigorously championed by state officials and representatives. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, though one is at pains to reconcile government support of excessively harsh punishment for those found guilty of taking part in the riots with its ready admission that the riots were a "very modern problem of alienated, angry young people". If the problem is justified anger on the part of a socially excluded demographic, how does enhanced punishment begin to address it? In contrast, what I am worried about is the danger of a trend in which, in the name of a project of remoralisation, 'public'- 'service' provision and delivery are downloaded on the fragile shoulders of volunteers within an already beleaguered civil society. The problems with this are quite obvious. In the first instance, it arises from what is at best a genuine misdiagnosis of society's problems as being primarily *moral* in nature, to which, it is assumed, a society of 'more' volunteers and 'deeper' volunteering is the answer. It seems to me that this is a reading of the travails of modernity and the modern society that ought to be challenged, while still affirming and cherishing the obvious benefits of volunteering. A good part of these reflections is devoted to challenging that diagnosis.

Second, I think the emphasis on 'morals' by a pietistic state may distract from what seems to me to be of greater importance- a critical analysis of the state (again, with special emphasis on Africa) against the background of the transformations wrought by neoliberal capitalism. The way the call to volunteering is currently articulated, one might be led to think that things are going on ever so swimmingly between state and civil society, that democracy is being smoothly enacted, that development is just a matter of time; in short, that 'we' are one big happy 'community' or 'family'. Since that is obviously not the case in the world as most of us know it, I think it is important to bring social conflict back to the discourse of volunteering, if only as a way of countering the propaganda of statist and others eager to place the burden of societal regeneration on civil society.

A third issue which I would like to see privileged is citizenship. Volunteering is a civic act, one that, ideally, is driven by a volunteer's sense of 'belonging' within a particular civic community. It is an act of social citizenship if you will. Yet, citizenship hardly takes place in a vacuum. It is at best a dialogic and socially embedded phenomenon in which the more a particular state is deemed to be socially responsible, the more individuals appreciate and value their 'citizenship'. Volunteering is therefore best 'performed' and usually more effective when the state is seen to pay its dues to society, something which can hardly be said about many African states today. This understanding of volunteering as something socially situated and anchored in a web of norms and institutions is noticeably underemphasised in the volunteerism literature, and part of my burden here is to correct this oversight. In response to the immediate foregoing, one can imagine a line of interrogation thus: if the state has paid its dues (meaning, if it managed to be even minimally accountable to the society), will volunteering be truly participatory and developmental as opposed to making up for societal defects? Am I not being utopian? My tentative answer is that a radical overhaul in the attitude of the state will not necessarily make volunteering redundant or less participatory. Rather, volunteerism will have to take on a new hue and purpose in response to a newly imagined imperative for social change.

Finally, no discussion of volunteering is ever complete without a reference to the youth.¹ Such is their energy and boundless optimism. But from Cairo to Cape Town, young people in African countries face all sorts of challenges, and it is fruitless talking about volunteering and civic service, especially as it relates to young volunteers, without being attentive to those challenges. Certain basic questions would seem pertinent in this regard. For instance: What can the notion of volunteering mean to a generation that often feels alienated from authority, and seems rootless amid the economic pressures of globalisation? How is the nature of volunteering itself changing, given that an increasing number of young people are 'forced' to volunteer, and to see volunteering as a coping strategy, or at best a half-way house between joblessness and unemployment? Is it still volunteering as we know it if young volunteers approach volunteerism as a way of marking time while waiting for the right opportunity to bail out? Certainly, there is, globally, a marked departure from the 'old' volunteerism, and an incipient professionalisation of volunteering. What are the implications of this transformation?

In pursuing these questions, I am not just interested in volunteerism for its own sake. My point is that the greater our understanding of the landscape for volunteering, the better our chances of providing effective answers to the question of how to stimulate popular participation and revitalise democracy across the African region.

¹ Understood as individuals between the ages of 15 and 35.

2 A (global) state of emergency

I noted at the beginning that the state has been at the forefront of recent campaigns for a reinstatement of the ethos of voluntarism and national service. I hasten to add that that is not a bad thing in itself. Frankly, I think it matters very little who is advocating volunteerism, as long as there is clarity about what it (volunteerism) can achieve, and the constraints on its social utility. More important, I think it is crucial that volunteerism be not seen by its advocates as a substitute for politics. This, it seems to me, is where the problem currently lies in regard to states' advocacy, and why I am dubious about it. Let me explain.

If there is anything that observers of the contemporary global order agree on, it is that the world is in the throes of a fundamental crisis, the depth, complexity, and dimensions of which it is still too early to apprehend. What seems fairly certain is that the crisis is transforming both (the ideas of) the state and citizenship as many people have come to understand them. For instance, in regard to the state, scholars like Alain de Benoist have mourned its increasing ineffectualness "in the face of contemporary challenges, progressively losing all its "majestic values" (2011, 10). Part of his explanation for this is the resurgence "of a process of individualisation in all arenas...leading to the disappearance of all the grand collective projects that one provided a foundation for a "we." The erosion of the ideational foundation for a "we" speaks, on the other hand, to a global diminution of citizenship, evidenced in many parts of the world by the profound incapacity of "citizens' in various national societies to consummate the ideal of popular participation. Suffice to say, this has important implications for regional integration, regional citizenship, and ultimately the development of a regional identity. Volunteer exchanges (which do not have to be limited to young people) and collaboration and exchange programmes in the area of higher education can reinvigorate the idea of citizenship through the promotion of regional integration and a sense of regional identity.² In this regard, member countries of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) can learn from the experience of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which has had a measure of success in fostering a sense of West African citizenship among nationals of its sixteen constituent countries.

Admittedly, the challenge of consummating citizenship has a specific resonance in Africa, dating back, obviously, though by no means exclusively, to the character of the state inherited at the dawn of political independence, and the ever-widening cleft between state-power and the people. Yet, to say that both states and citizens face increasingly difficult times is not to elide the fact that, at the same time, "different kinds of states" continue to "make different kinds of citizenship possible" (Cornwall, et al, 2011, 7). What this means is that while it is imperative to reflect on the African experience against a global backcloth, it is equally important not to discount how African countries' specific "architectures of governance" have impacted the various formations of state and citizenship. This is what I mean by politics. It is, ultimately, an attempt to place at the centre of discussion the ways in which the crisis of political accountability, the transparency deficit, and the stupendous poverty found in many African countries are reinforced by a political culture still largely characterised by the use of personal 'connections' and other informal arrangements.

² For more on this, see Kotecha P & VOSESA (2011) "Engaging Universities in the Regional Integration Project in Southern Africa". Paper presented at the Southern African Conference on Volunteer Action for Development, 17-19 October 2011, Johannesburg, South Africa

I would argue that unless this complexity is fully apprehended, the ideals of voluntarism cannot be fully realised, even with the best of intentions. This is partly because, as I mentioned earlier (a point also corroborated by the relevant literature) voluntarism seems to produce the best outcomes when anchored in the socio-political fabric. In addition, it will save us the pains of repeating the mistakes of a previous historical moment, when newly independent African states rushed to invest in social development without requiring local voluntary input (Perold 2006). What seems to be happening right now is a *concurrent opposite*: states are championing volunteerism and rushing to implement various voluntary service programmes without asking critical questions about the sociality of voluntarism, and what kinds of benefits voluntarism is likely to produce in different environments. Moreover, states are pushing the argument that voluntarism is a necessary corrective to the moral squalor in the society, emblemised, unsurprisingly, by a bereft youth demographic. In contesting this narrative, I think it is important to: (1) deny that the problems of African societies are primarily moral, or at the very least that they are not 'moral' in the way their current normative framing might imply; (2) remind ourselves that while volunteering can be productive of social capital, its specific outcomes are always uncertain; (3) insist that, in the end, volunteerism is just one dimension of a morally and politically complex spectrum that is civic participation, involvement or engagement; (4) insist, as a corollary of the latter point, that volunteerism has its own dark side, ranging from the tyrannies inherent in certain organisational models of voluntarism, to the atrocities committed by categories of volunteers under particular political regimes; and finally (5) remind ourselves that the kind of narrative we are contesting here is usually what results when civic engagement is hijacked by the state for its own partisan ends.

3 Moral politics versus political moralism

It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a world in which moral judgment of some sort plays no role in human calculations. I hasten to say this because in taking on the moralist perspective on the modern (African) predicament, I am by no means suggesting that a moral approach is in itself invalid. As a matter of fact, the basic problem I have with the current moral approach to the analysis of African societies- an approach which, incidentally, is inextricable from the influence of African charismatic Christianity and its apocalyptic anxieties- is its reductionist view of morality. Badru (2011) makes this point eloquently with his crucial distinction between what he calls "moral politicians" and "political moralists". For him,

A moral politician is one who interprets the principles of political prudence in such a way that they can coexist with morality, while a political moralist is he (sic) who fashions his morality in such a way that it works to the benefit of the statesman. As such, a moral politician is an altruistic agent in the sense that he accords his actions with morality in serving the people, while a political moralist is egoistic. In other words, the aim of a moral politician in acquiring political power is to ensure distributive justice in society, while that of a political moralist is to acquire political power in order to satisfy his (sic) selfish interest (2011, 58-59).

Once we set aside the matter of why politicians acquire power *ab initio*- that question does not interest me here- the link between the separation of moral politics from political moralism, and the limits and limitations of a moral approach to the crisis in African countries becomes clearer. First, political moralism in the African context tends to lack moral diversity, particularly when moral debasement is

defined strictly as youth 'anti-social behaviour', illustrated with ready examples such as prostitution and drug abuse. Second, political moralism could become blind to the moral problems of the state and its functionaries, thus creating the impression that moral codes apply only to young people or other non-state agents.

But what has this got to do with voluntarism? The fundamental connection is this: A reading of social crisis as a product of moral collapse means that voluntarism becomes an imagined corrective to perceived ethical flaws, rather than the first step in a process of civic involvement, one that poses critical questions about the nature of political power, the distribution of social goods, and the allocation of resources within the society in question. Moral problems are real, no doubt, but I think it is ultimately futile, sociologically speaking, not to imagine them as a bellwether for a much more fundamental problem. That problem, as I have suggested throughout, is the simultaneous tearing apart of local communities and disarticulation of individual trajectories by powerful global forces.

Voluntarism, rightly imagined and properly orientated, can help in coming to terms with this, especially when it is combined with education that creates global awareness. Still, it cannot be the magic wand that some recent advocates expect it to be, for in the end, voluntarism is at best "a narrow slice of citizenship" (Leighninger 2004, 38); whereas the long-term solution is "to give people a range of political opportunities" (Ibid) which can lead to fundamental changes in the rules of the political game.

4 Youth, citizenship and social exclusion

Julius Malema, the thirty-year old president of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League, may not be the most famous man in South Africa at the moment. But he certainly numbers among the most notorious. Malema is a man many people love to hate, generally for what they perceive as his rabble rousing, and specifically for the way he has embraced the song, 'Shoot the Boer'³. For such critics, Malema is guilty of an opportunistic primordialism which seems to be profoundly at odds with the post-apartheid South African consensus. Mr. Malema may occupy a prestigious and powerful position as the president of the ANC Youth League, but that does not make him chubby with President Jacob Zuma - both have had their differences. Nor is he likely to win a popularity contest even within the party, where he currently faces an internal inquiry.

If you discount his own proximity to power, Malema actually epitomises the contemporary sociology of young people in South Africa and Africa in various ways; in his tense relationship with the past, his unseemly, though understandable appetite for political resolution, and his ambiguous relationship with authority. This may explain why many young South Africans have taken to him and his 'cause'.

Beyond this, however, he is also a symbol of hope for many young South Africans, not because they can't see through his own personal contradictions. Of course they can. But they also feel that he may be their best chance of bringing their private frustrations into the public space.

Whatever one may think of Julius Malema and/or young people's strategy, there is no running away from the reality of young people's disaffection in the country. According to a 2005 study commissioned by the Umsobomvu Youth Fund and compiled by the South African Human Sciences Research Council

³ On September 12, 2011, after a court trial which attracted a lot of international attention, he was found guilty of hate speech.

(HSRC), “more than two-thirds of South Africans between the ages of 18 and 35 are unemployed” (UYF 2005, 7). The same report notes that “Africans and women make up the largest proportion of unemployed people”, and that “of these, those living in rural areas are the most severely affected, often isolated by deeply embedded patterns of male and youth labour migration” (Ibid, 7-8). Furthermore, while adult unemployment in the country currently stands at over 25 percent, almost 50 percent of young people aged 15 to 24 years are unemployed (Statistics South Africa, 2011).

Youth angst in South Africa is at best a sliver, an important one no doubt, of a larger problem, thus: post-apartheid South Africa has struggled to consummate the promise of the anti-apartheid liberation struggle. For the black majority, the fact that it boasts one of the most liberal constitutions in the entire world may be something to be proud of; yet, it is also a painful reminder that political liberalism has failed so far failed to deliver economic justice. Hence, nearly two decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa remains profoundly unequal. In fact, it is one of the most unequal societies in the whole world.

These facts matter for two reasons. One is perspective. Since 2000, South Africa has witnessed a recurrence of apparently xenophobic attacks in which various nationals- Mozambicans, Zimbabweans, Congolese, Nigerians- have been targeted by gangs of armed youths. These attacks have caused many unfortunate- including South African- deaths. While not discounting the many plausible explanations for these attacks, I wish to emphasise here the need to insert them into the larger South African ecology of despair, in particular young people’s feeling of alienation, and “feelings of powerlessness and futility that may manifest in depression and even despair” (Ibid, 10). Suffice to say, these do not justify the attacks. Anti-foreigner sentiment is a serious problem in South Africa, and no amount of syrup laid on will change that. But- and this is my specific point- it serves no purpose to denounce anti-foreigner sentiment without taking into account the despair of everyday existence as part of the animating factors.

A second reason why an accurate social portrait matters is a theme I have been harping on all along, and it is this: an awareness of the social context will curb (curb, not eliminate) our enthusiasm about the social functionality of voluntarism. In particular, it should serve as a reminder, first, of the scale of what we are up against; and second, that while voluntarism may indeed produce tangible outcomes for both the volunteer (for example, leaving a positive and everlasting imprint) and the immediate community, it cannot be a replacement for full political involvement. What this means is that voluntarism must simultaneously be combined with other civic measures. Crucial here are the ideas of civic engagement and active citizenship as more engaged forms of volunteering that have a more explicit purpose of social change.

5 Final thoughts

The German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, likes to remind us that many of the positive social goods we have come take for granted today are actually unwitting fallouts of utterly cynical social engineering. With similar attention to paradox, I have suggested that the outcomes of apparently positive social initiatives are uncertain, if not dubious. I do not mean to dampen critical enthusiasm for volunteerism. My object, on the contrary, is to interject a particular agnosticism into the discourse of volunteerism, as a way of bringing in a much needed realism in regards to what volunteerism is capable of achieving, particularly in the current global situation in which states, communities, and citizens the world over are in profound flux, while civil societies continue to chafe under the weight of various pre-rational impulses.

The tendency in this kind of situation, evident especially in the examples of many states struggling to cope with different orders of social breakdown, has been to recourse to volunteerism, almost in the manner of an 'emergency exit'. As I noted earlier, there is actually nothing wrong with this, so long as there is clarity about the possibilities- and limitations- of volunteerism. In fact, if history is a guide, there are no insuperable reasons why instrumentalising volunteerism in this way should not lead to concrete positive outcomes. A good example is the Nigerian National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme which was introduced to help bring about national reconciliation following the end of the country's civil war in 1970. Despite serious problems, mostly related to the larger political context, the programme has been a success (Obadare 2010).⁴

Even then, the instrumentalisation of volunteerism ought to be combined with persistent questioning about the nature of volunteerism, what motivates people to volunteer, religious belief as a motivation for volunteering, the overlaps and divergences between volunteering and other forms of civic engagement, the gains of formal volunteering vis-à-vis informal forms of volunteering, and the complex links between volunteerism and social activism (CIVICUS/UNV/IAVE 2008).

⁴ Most observers agree that the NYSC has fulfilled its basic institutional objective of bringing about social integration in Nigeria. Its value has been questioned in recent years after religious conflict in the northern part of the country resulted in the killings of corps members from the south. Some have argued that such conflicts are evidence of the failure of the NYSC. I prefer to see them as a reminder of the fact that even the best national service programmes can only do so much in a country split along ethno-religious lines.

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