

The willingness of undergraduate students to volunteer for NGO work: a Ghanaian case study

Willingness of
undergraduate
students

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite the increasing awareness on students' volunteerism globally, and its potential benefit to national development, there is limited research information on the subject in developing countries including Ghana. The purpose of this paper is to assess the willingness of university undergraduate students in Ghana to volunteer for non-governmental organisation (NGO) work.

Design/methodology/approach – The research used a quantitative research approach using a descriptive survey design. The data were drawn from a survey of 678 students from the University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

Findings – The study shows high willingness of university undergraduate students to volunteer for NGO work. The motives relate more to students' search for understanding of people and their context, values and career enhancement, than for their social, protection and recognition needs. The students are more likely to engage in NGO activities relating to peer education, counselling and environmental protection, than in administrative duties, relief and advocacy.

Practical implications – The study suggests that there is a great potential for students' volunteerism in Ghana, and recommends that Ghanaian universities should integrate volunteerism into their curricula to prepare and link students to volunteer opportunities in NGO and the service sectors.

Originality/value – The case study provides new thought and suggestions on students' volunteerism to developing countries and Ghana in particular. The evidence and context of likelihood to volunteer among tertiary students are lessons for developing countries with similar context to Ghana.

Keywords Students, Ghana, Volunteerism, Non-governmental organization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In many developing countries today, the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in community development has become inevitable as the governments continue to demonstrate their inability to adequately meet the needs of the people. Accordingly, Ghana has a considerable number of NGOs, which are seen to be playing an increasingly important role in development (Issa, 2005). Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are about 3,000 NGOs registered in Ghana, contributing to various sectors of development such as provision of clean drinking water, health services and facilities, education, shelter, credit facilities, environment protection and extension services (Edusei, 1997; Bob-Milliar, 2005). The estimation is that these NGOs provide between 45 and 50 per cent of the country's healthcare services and over 50 per cent of all family planning services (Danquah, 2011). It is not surprising that Holloway (2001) describes NGOs as organisations formed to complement, supplement and offer alternatives to government development efforts.



Similarly, and in a broader sense, Fisher (2006) describes NGOs as non-state, voluntary and non-profit-oriented groups who pursue issues of public interest.

NGOs by their nature as non-profit and private voluntary grouping of individuals or associations depend substantially on donations from philanthropists or volunteers to deliver their services. However, a major challenge of NGOs in developing countries, including Ghana, has been their inability to mobilise adequate financial and human resources to operate effectively. Many local NGOs in development sphere lack stable financial base to effectively run projects and adequately remunerate their staff (Sarr, 2006). As argued by Turary (2002), the continuity of NGOs depends on their continuity in raising funds, else they will wither and die. To manage this resource constraint, NGOs are now shifting their attention to using volunteers in delivering their services. In cognisance of this, the year 2001 was declared as "International Year of Volunteers" by the United Nations General Assembly, with a resolution for member states to recognise the importance of volunteerism and to encourage and support it (United Nations, 2001). As a development asset, infrastructure for promoting and managing volunteerism is a key requirement for harnessing its power (UN Volunteers, 2005).

The focus of this research is on formal volunteering, which means giving freely of one's time, to help others through organisations including NGOs (Smith *et al.*, 2010). It is about the willingness and ability of citizens to give their time, out of a sense of solidarity and without expectation of monetary reward (which can mean little or no financial compensation), to promote development (Unstead-Joss, 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2010). Beyond this economic view of volunteering, there is little consensus on the meaning of term and why people volunteer given that it is value-laden (Watts, 2002; Unstead-Joss, 2008). As such, the argument on whether volunteer motivation is based entirely on altruism or personal benefits is still on, and inconclusive (Unstead-Joss, 2008). Yet, it is important to understand why individuals volunteer for the development of proper management structures to harness its potential for effective socio-economic development.

For many NGOs, recruiting volunteers is vital if they are to cope with the demand for their services. All over the world, NGOs have fallen on volunteers, especially, tertiary level students to provide service to the public. University students have been an important segment in the volunteering context. Not only are the benefits enormous to the students giving and the NGOs receiving, but also the potential career-related benefits are also particularly aligned with the needs of students, and students are likely to have greater time-related flexibility than their same age counterparts who are employed full time (Berger and Milem, 2002).

Considerable literature (Astin and Sax, 1998; Janoski *et al.*, 1998; Haski-Leventhal *et al.*, 2008; Smith *et al.*, 2010) is available on volunteering by tertiary students in developed countries, especially, the UK and USA. In these countries, student volunteering is regarded by the governments as essential to perpetuate and engaged civil society (Haski-Leventhal *et al.*, 2008). Smith *et al.* (2010) have reported high rates of student volunteering in these countries especially, in the western English-speaking countries. They have sought to promote participation in volunteering, with particular focus on the youth based on theory that young people are more likely to volunteer than adults (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003). There is also the view that people who volunteer while in school, especially, tertiary (e.g. universities) are more likely to volunteer later in their lives (Astin and Sax, 1998; Janoski *et al.*, 1998). Drawing from the work of Smith *et al.* (2010), altruism and self-orientated career motives and benefits are important to students' likelihood of volunteering for NGO work, especially in developed countries.

Despite the increasing awareness on students' volunteerism globally, it is intriguing that there is limited research information on the subject in developing countries including Ghana. Historical discourses in Ghana, however, reveal cultural practices have typically included

volunteerism. Such practices often reflected the needs of communities to support themselves through activities such as community farm work, helping a neighbour to build, or spontaneous actions to defend the interest of the community in times of disaster or danger. Recent developments, however, are showing the potential for NGOs in Ghana to use volunteers in their activities. As noted in the Ghana Human Development 2007 Report (UNDP, 2007), NGO such as Help Age Ghana engaged team of volunteers in addressing the health needs of older persons through community clinics/screening and counselling.

With increasing attention to volunteerism from NGOs in Ghana, especially, regarding the recruitment of volunteers, a better understanding of tertiary students' willingness and motives for volunteering would be crucial in their recruitment and volunteer management decisions. Thus, the main objective of the study was to assess the willingness of undergraduate students in Ghana to volunteer for NGOs work based on a case study. The specific objectives were to: examine students' willingness to volunteer for NGO work; assess the motives behind students' willingness to volunteer for NGO work; and ascertain the kind of NGO activities that students are interested to volunteer.

Theoretical underpinning of motivation to volunteer

The major argument of functionalist theory is that even though different people can carry out the same activities; these activities may provide various psychological functions for diverse individuals. This approach is identified with functional theories of attitudes and persuasion (Herek, 1987; Katz, 1960). By this, individuals may have comparable attitudes or engage in similar conduct, but with divergent motivational functions. This approach has helped in revealing some underlying motivations of volunteering. According to functional analysis of volunteerism, people engaging in similar acts may have different underlying motivations for doing so. Clary *et al.* (1998) catalogued the following six functions of volunteerism, namely, values, understanding, enhancement, career, social motivation and protective. These functions propose that volunteers undertake volunteerism to express personal values such as humanitarianism, to understand the population; enhances oneself psychologically, gain career-related experience to reduce negative feelings such as guilt, or personal problems and socially to enhance social relationships (Clary and Snyder, 1999). Clary *et al.* (1998) suggest a functional approach to volunteering as serving at least one of these functions being it social or personal, and one benefiting from one or several of the functions.

Esmond (2004), drawing on an initial volunteer motivation inventory developed in a previous study by McEwin and Jacobsen-D'Arcy (2002) came out with ten key motivational categories to volunteering. Six out of these reflected Clary *et al.* (1992) psychological functions to volunteerism. The remaining four are: reciprocity (the belief that "what goes around comes around"); recognition (recognising their skills and contribution); social interaction (building social networks); and reactivity (healing and addressing their own past or current issues). This study used the functional approach to assess the motives behind students' willingness to volunteer for NGO work.

Methodology

The case study adopted a descriptive survey to gain insight into the current status of a phenomenon as supported in the literature (Gay, 1987; Kerlinger, 1979). This requires that a sample of respondents is carefully selected and the information they provide is used to describe the phenomenon – willingness of tertiary students in Ghana to volunteer for NGO work. To achieve the research objectives, data from regular undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast (UCC) were used. The UCC had over 80 per cent (14,748) of its students at the time of data collection (February, 2012) in undergraduate programmes

including education, social sciences, business, physical sciences, biological sciences, arts, agriculture and medical sciences, under schools/faculties.

Lists of students forming the sample frame were obtained from the “Students Records and Management Information Systems” at UCC. Using Krejcie and Morgan proposition (as cited in Sarantakos, 2005) a sample size of 737 was determined as suitable for a study population of 14,748 at five per cent degree of accuracy. Two stage sampling technique was used for the study. First, a proportionate stratified sampling technique, using 5 per cent of the total population from each school/faculty, was selected across board taking into consideration sex of respondents. Second, a systematic random sampling technique was employed in selecting the respondents. The ninth person from the population in each schools/faculties was selected, making a total sample size of 737 students for the study. To determine their willingness to volunteer, students were asked whether they are willing to volunteer or not while in school; the reasons for volunteering or not volunteering; and the kind of NGO activities they are interested in volunteering by agreeing or disagreeing with a range of questions, with some on a five-point Likert scale, and based on the functional approach theory of why people volunteer. The response rate was 93.2 per cent (i.e. 678 respondents). The data were analysed with descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages and χ^2 as presented in the following sections.

Findings

Characteristics of respondents

Majority of the respondents were males. Out of a total of 687 respondents, 66.9 per cent were males. They were mainly young adults, with about two-third (78.5 per cent) between the age range of 18-24 years. In all, 13 per cent were within the ages of 25-29, and the rest above 30 years. Accordingly, majority (87.1 per cent) of them were single as many of them entered the university directly from senior high school and very unlikely to be married in view of their relatively younger ages. Most of the respondents were urban dwellers and came from middle-income families. About half (50.1 per cent) were from urban area, 36.2 per cent from semi-urban area and 13.7 per cent from rural area.

Willingness to volunteer

The respondents were asked whether they are willing to volunteer for NGOs whiles in school or not. The import of the question was to ascertain the likelihood of the students volunteering for NGO work whiles in school. More than half of the respondents 357 (52.6 per cent) responded in the affirmative, 86 (12.7 per cent) respondents said “no”, while 235 (34.7 per cent) were undecided. The number of students willing to volunteer were significantly higher than those who were not ($p < 0.05$). This suggests a substantial motivation and willingness among the students to volunteer (Table I). Ruddorf (2006) in the context of El Salvador had reported similar results indicating that tertiary students are more willing to volunteer.

Ruddorf (2006) explained that the finding is because of two factors. The first was the fact that volunteering is part of the school curriculum in El Salvador. The second reason

Responses	Observed frequency	%	χ^2
Yes	357	52.6	175.34*
Undecided	235	34.7	
No	86	12.7	
Total	678	100.0	

Notes: $\alpha = 0.05$. * $p < 0.05$

Table I.
Respondents' willingness to volunteer for NGO work

was that it was a prerequisite for employment in El Salvador. In Ghana, interestingly, volunteering is not part of the curriculum at the universities, although it is compulsory that every tertiary level graduate undertake a one-year national service. This service to the nation could be considered as a form of volunteering since national service persons are only given a little allowance for their sustenance for the period. NGOs can formally request from government the services of national service personnel to provide services to the public. The NGOs pay the allowances of their national service personnel through the National Service Secretariat of the government. The completion of the national service has become a prerequisite for full time employment in most organisations in Ghana. In addition, when one is seeking employment, national service is counted as work experience.

To further probe students' willingness to volunteer, respondents were asked to give reasons as to why they were willing to or unwilling to volunteer. The main reasons given for willingness to volunteer included; helping to improve the lives of others, gaining experience and exposure, contributing to community/country building, and enhancing personal/career development. According to Brudney (1993) giving something worthwhile to society or helping others has been a consistent reason why individuals volunteer. Also, Clary and Snyder (1991) identify key motives for volunteering to include sharpening or stretching ones job skills, testing new careers and building a résumé. For those students who were unwilling to volunteer, the main reasons were time constraints and difficulty (extra burden) in combining volunteering and academic work.

Motivation for volunteering for NGOs

The study sought to find out the levels of importance accorded to the various motivation variables in influencing students' decision to volunteer. Respondents were presented with a list of 11 volunteer motives and asked to express their levels of agreement to set of reasons why they will volunteer (Clary and Snyder, 1991; Esmond, 2004). These were: values (volunteering to express important values, e.g. humanitarianism), understanding (volunteering to understand the population being helped), enhancement (volunteering to enhance oneself psychologically), career (volunteering to gain career-related experience), social (volunteering to enhance social relationships) and protective (volunteering to reduce negative feelings such as guilt, or personal problems). The other reasons why people volunteer were: reciprocity (whereby the individual volunteers in the belief that what goes around comes around. In the process of helping others and doing good, their volunteering work will also bring about good things for the volunteers themselves, recognition (whereby the individual is motivated to volunteer by being recognised for their skills and contribution), social interaction (whereby the individual volunteers to build social networks and enjoys the social aspects of interacting with others), and reactivity (whereby the individual volunteers out of a need to "heal" and address their own past or current issues). Finally, in the context of the USA, Putnam (2000) argued that religion is a crucial source of civic engagement and a strong reason for volunteering. These factors were combined in the study to provide a more complete picture of the complex study of volunteer motivation.

Overall, students rated their desire for understanding as the most important factor that motivates them to volunteer. The next items were value, career and religion, respectively. Recognition, protection and social were motivational variables least popular for volunteering. The findings as present in the section are consistent with the reasons provided by the students for willingness to volunteer for NGO work. The high ranking of understanding, value and career further supports Brudney's (1993) and Clary and Snyder (1991) assertions that helping others and career development are major reasons why people especially, the youth volunteer. This further supports a study by Gillespie and King (1985) which found volunteer activities as opportunities for sharpening job skills, enriching ones'

resume and exploring career options. It further supports Puttman's (2000) finding that religious affiliation is an important motive for volunteering.

The study further investigated if there were any significant associations among the levels of importance accorded to the various motivation variables by students. Using the Pearson's χ^2 test, the results show that a highly significant moderate relationship exist between the various motivational variables and the degree of importance that student accorded them (see Table II: $\chi^2 = 2,297.50, p < 0.01, r$ (contingency coefficient) = 0.47).

NGO activities respondents are interested in volunteering

The study also sought to ascertain the kind of NGO activities that the undergraduate students are willing to volunteer. The outcome of the analysis is presented in Table III.

The analysis revealed that generally many students were interested in peer education, counselling, environmental protection and health, and least interested in relief and

Table II.
Relative importance of factors that motivate respondents to volunteer

Motivational variables <i>n</i>	Level of agreement – score/frequencies (%)					Sum ^a	Contingency coefficient
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree		
Understanding	10 (1)	2 (0)	54 (8)	321 (42)	373 (49)	3,325 ¹	0.47*
Value	6 (1)	0 (0)	44 (6)	403 (53)	310 (41)	3,300 ²	
Career	3 (0)	10 (1)	75 (10)	449 (58)	237 (31)	3,229 ³	
Religion	9 (1)	4 (1)	102 (14)	334 (12)	295 (40)	3,134 ⁴	
Reciprocity	3 (0)	40 (5)	80 (11)	332 (44)	294 (39)	3,121 ⁵	
Reactivity	9 (1)	28 (4)	126 (17)	368 (50)	213 (29)	2,980 ⁶	
Social Interaction	7 (1)	12 (2)	137 (19)	419 (57)	156 (21)	2,898 ⁷	
Enhancement	27 (4)	52 (7)	172 (23)	296 (40)	202 (27)	2,841 ⁸	
Recognition	21 (3)	92 (12)	180 (24)	331 (45)	118 (16)	2,659 ⁹	
Protection	21 (3)	153 (21)	272 (37)	202 (28)	87 (12)	2,386 ¹⁰	
Social	56 (7)	204 (26)	323 (42)	155 (20)	34 (4)	2,223 ¹¹	

Notes: ^aMotivator Rating/Rank, $\alpha = 0.05$. * $p < 0.05$

Table III.
Activities of NGOs that respondents are interested in volunteering

Activity of interest	Level of interest – frequency (%)			Total score	
	Third	Second	Foremost	Score	Rank
Peer education	44 (12)	201 (53)	134 (35)	848	1st
Counselling	76 (20)	216 (58)	82 (22)	754	2nd
Environmental protection	76 (23)	182 (55)	73 (22)	659	3rd
Health/hospitals	17 (8)	154 (68)	56 (25)	493	4th
Orphanages	17 (10)	106 (65)	41 (25)	352	5th
Agricultural/farming	26 (19.5)	81 (61)	26 (19.5)	266	6th
Support counselling	48 (32)	87 (58)	14 (9)	264	7th
Administrative tasks	22 (26)	40 (48)	22 (26)	168	8th
Disability /special needs	7 (10)	57 (84)	4 (6)	133	9th
Charitable fundraising	9 (16)	47 (81)	2 (3)	109	10th
Organisation of activities	12 (22)	35 (64)	7 (13)	103	11th
Campaigns/awareness raising	13 (23)	44 (77)	–	101	12th
Capacity training and lecturing	8 (18)	21 (47)	16 (36)	98	13th
Cultural heritage/tourism	16 (31)	30 (59)	5 (10)	91	14th
Advice/mediation/advocacy	5 (13.5)	22 (59.5)	10 (27)	79	15th
Relief	10 (31)	16 (50)	6 (19)	60	16th
Coordination of meetings	19 (56)	15 (44)	–	49	17th

Notes: χ^2 (34, $n = 687$) = 220.334. $p < 0.05$

coordination of meetings. When respondents were asked the reason for the activities they chose, the major reasons were that they want activities that would improve the lives of others as well as those that related to their field of studies so they can give off their best, and those that will enhance their personal/career development. The responses were consistent with the findings of Garland (as cited by O'Brien *et al.*, 2002) that students volunteers are generally interested in activities that would further their potential for employment and opportunities for graduate/professional studies. It also agrees with the assertions of Brudney(1993), and Clary and Snyder (1991) that young people will volunteer to help others and to develop their career opportunities.

Conclusions and implications

To manage the increasing resource constraints for NGO work in developing countries, NGOs in these countries would have to take advantage of available volunteers within their reach. With a majority of the students showing willingness to volunteer for NGO work, it can be concluded from the case study that there is an untapped volunteer human resource available for NGOs in Ghana. This implied that with a proper institutionalisation of volunteerism in tertiary education, students' volunteer orientation programmes, and proactive volunteer recruitment drive by NGOs, a new avenue for human resource would be made available for NGOs and the service sector in Ghana. The institutionalisation should be based on a clear understanding of its role within the context of socio-political and cultural norms, given that volunteerism is based on the principles of choice and free will, and the ways it is expressed may vary in different contexts. Recognising this fact will be the first step towards harnessing this vast resource of volunteers in Ghana.

On motivational factors, students rated their search for understanding of communities (target audience) as the most important factor that will motivate them to volunteer, followed by their values, career, religion, reciprocity, reactivity, social interaction, enhancement and recognition. The case study also shows that tertiary students in Ghana are more likely to opt for NGO activities relating to peer education, counselling and environmental protection, compared to those relating to advocacy, relief and coordination of meetings. Thus, to attract tertiary students to volunteer, NGOs would have to tailor some of their programmes to offer students opportunities to understanding the beneficiary communities (i.e. provision of some field experience) and career enhancement, especially in activities relating to peer education, counselling and environmental protection. Of particular relevance is the need for NGOs and tertiary institutions in Ghana to form partnership in the training process for mutual benefit.

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