



May 2005, No.1

Understanding more about volunteerism

The Issue

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) is a volunteer organisation. Globally, in governments, corporations and organizations there is growing awareness of the need to learn more about the actual nature and potential of volunteerism.

It is not surprising therefore that a major corporation such as UPS and a volunteer organization such as WAGGGS can work together on volunteerism.

This is a useful impetus for WAGGGS to review its own understanding of volunteerism and of how it defines and engages volunteers – particularly but not exclusively adult volunteers. The Signature Programme experience can contribute to this debate.

The same – but different

Adult volunteers are defined and engaged in a number of ways in Member Organisations (MOs).

Differences were documented early in 2004 by the three participating MOs when the Signature Programme began.

In WAGGGS, volunteers govern MOs and undertake various roles in related governance activities and responsibilities.

In all three MOs, adult volunteers lead groups, run programmes and training. There is usually an allied fund raising role – although this varies in the extent to which it is developed.

There are a variety of ways in which adult supporters are defined and counted. This has implications for WAGGGS about how it counts membership numbers.

The challenge

There are implications for defining, recognising, documenting and communicating with adult volunteers

The challenge is to offer ways for volunteers to be involved with a range of time and resources accepted as support. The ongoing commitment of several hours every week, for example, may be too much for someone despite a desire to offer support. In some cases, there has been an attitude of ‘all this or nothing’ on offer from MOs.

There must be awareness that people volunteer for many different reasons and to meet many different personal needs. Retention depends on meeting the needs of volunteers and managing them effectively.

Managing costs

In Mexico, in some places membership fees were very high – sometimes equalling several days’ salary for a rural worker. Fee structures were revised to allow for flexibility, sometimes reduced to a donation, covering quota and insurance costs.

Many ex-members who could be registered as ‘GAUS’ (Former Guides – usually taken to be older, ex-members but now being offered also as an option for girls leaving high school, at university or young workers) could not afford high registration fees. Many more might offer services now that their fee, too, has been reduced with the option of making a donation.

Reaching out to girls in institutional care and in poorer areas also required more flexible options about costs.

These revisions have required commitment to external fund raising where previously any fund raising again, targeted the ever reducing membership.

Managing information and contact

Managing volunteers involves having effective data bases of information and contact details – not always easy when numbers are in the tens of thousands. There are staffing and resource implications. This becomes more demanding when the types of volunteerism become more varied.

In some MOs there has been no record of adults who are not members but who do offer considerable support such as financial funding of specific initiatives, offering regular service in accounting or interpretation and translation, offering support with media recognition.

WAGGGS considers a member one who is enrolled and participates in Girl Guiding/Girl Scouting programmes. World Quota for members may be paid by members – or by the MO.

Limitations

Clearly, some MOs have been restricted in the ways they enable adults to volunteer support. Leading groups, training and taking responsibilities in governance are demanding of time and personal resources. There is often a falling off in participation at certain phases of life such as when young adults are involved with tertiary study, early stages of careers etc. These are times when extended commitment of time and resources restrict major input to any volunteer activity – although intellectual interest and emotional or philosophical interest may be heightened by increased awareness of society etc. It may also be times when the type of activity offered by volunteering presents as more of a duty than of 'fun'.

Hong Kong Girl Guides Association

In the Hong Kong Girl Guides Association (HKGGA) adult volunteers engaged in governance roles may or may not be members who take the promise, wear uniform or pay fees.

It has found ways to use a variety of talents of non-member adult supporters. This includes having male volunteers on committees and as key community supporters

Mexico

The Guías de México (GdeM) had required almost all adults involved as supporters to be fully registered members. Now, they are re-engaging adults – young and old – who can volunteer on a more ad hoc or casual basis. These are GAUS or former guides. The review of fees has complemented this new approach. Categories of membership have been reviewed and expanded.

Malaysia

Malaysia is strategising to attract university and college students by offering them particular ways to be involved that recognise demands on time and resources. They are also strategising to recognise non-member support.

GGAM has also reviewed how it manages data and actual member numbers. It is introducing a computerised data base for more effective recording.

Recognising possibilities for volunteers

Between them these MOs can offer possibilities which include the usual roles of governance, training and programme leadership. They can also offer such options as: occasional help with specialist activities (photography, rock climbing etc); occasional help with events (especially fund raising events); introductions to useful contacts (within government departments, ministries, with specialist suppliers for sporting goods etc); fund raising and promotional events (similar to those offered for Thinking Day and/or Walk for the World); 'mentoring' new leaders and many other activities.

A particular option could be involvement with community development or community service projects. These may be organised by MOs but have space for non-members to participate with members.

Benefits

The benefit will be increased numbers of adult volunteers engaged in a wider range of ways with more people offering support for WAGGGS to achieve its Mission – and more girls and young women enabled to reach their full potential. It is useful to be able to compare how other MOs approach volunteerism, working with and managing adult volunteers. Resources such as the WAGGGS toolkit on recruitment can be helpful.

There are many opportunities for WAGGGS to contribute to and participate in debates about volunteerism and to increase levels of expertise and knowledge.

Bmf
Global Director
Signature Programme Volunteerism

World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts
World Bureau, Olave Centre, 12c Lyndhurst Road,
London NW3 5PQ, England

