

The impact of volunteering on volunteers and on society at large (WP3)



The aim of this work phase is to probe into the micro foundations of social innovation with a focus on the enabling function of volunteering.

The research process will follow four major steps:

1. What helps and hinders participation in third sector activities?

Which factors facilitate third sector participation by citizens in Europe, and which factors form barriers that prevent citizens from participating? In this step we identify enabling factors and conditions that hinder engagement in the third sector in terms of volunteering, including public perceptions and attitudes of citizens towards the third sector. We reviewed both the academic and non-academic literature.

Throughout Work Package 3, we restrict ourselves to formal voluntary work in third sector organisations. Even with such a restricted definition, voluntary work varies widely across

levels of intensity of participation, the societal goals served by third sector organizations and tasks performed by volunteers.

Based on theories on charitable giving, we propose that eight mechanisms can be distinguished that drive volunteering: (1) awareness of need, (2) solicitation, (3) costs and benefits, (4) altruism, (5) reputation, (6) psychological costs and benefits, (7) values and (8) efficacy.

We summarise what is known from literature in different countries regarding similarities and differences in the conceptualisation of voluntary work, factors that help and hinder volunteering, commonly used organisational strategies, and perceptions of volunteering and the third sector. Although differences exist in the definition of what is perceived as voluntary work, many mechanisms appear to be similar across Europe.

These literature reviews can be found in [D3.1, Participation in volunteering: what helps and hinders.](#)

2. How can the impact of third sector activities on participants be measured?

How can the economic and social value and contribution of volunteering to the welfare of participants be measured reliably? This task contains a methodological discussion on how to measure the impact of third sector activities on participants. We propose a model of impact and discuss how the impact of participation can be measured. The source of the measure (reported by the participant or someone else), the dimension of the measure (a change or a current state) and the way of analysing (between or within participants) determine what kind of estimate is obtained.

We concluded that different ways of estimating differ in the possibilities for causal inference. By systematically collecting and comparing previous empirical studies we have classified the quality of evidence of the impact of volunteering on different outcome variables. We have concluded that there is considerable scope for improvement. Relatively few publications have used the best available methods.

This methodological discussion can be found in [D3.2, How to estimate what participation in third sector activities does for participants](#).

3. What is the impact of third sector activities on participants?

How much does participation in third sector activities contribute to the welfare of participants? We answered this question using the best possible empirical strategy to estimate the impact of third sector activities on participants. We analysed 845.723 observations from 154.970 respondents in longitudinal panel surveys across Europe to examine the change in self-perceived health, subjective well-being, career status and social networks. We found that volunteering has positive effects on health, well-being and networks, but that the changes are small. Also we find that volunteering is beneficial for both the scope and quality of one's network. The effects on career outcomes are complex.

The results from the analyses on beneficial effects of volunteering can be found in [D3.3, Welfare impacts of participation](#).

4. How can the breadth and impact of third sector activities be enhanced?

If volunteering is beneficial for social innovation and people's welfare, what can organisations do to enhance voluntary contributions? We conducted qualitative interviews with organisational representatives, volunteers and former volunteers in the fields of social services, environmental protection, refugees community development and sports in the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom.

The results show that the existence of a central volunteer policy largely depends on the organisational structure. Decentralised organisations provide ample opportunity for local groups to develop strategies and to come up with bottom-up innovations. Although volunteers are important in facilitating social innovation, most innovations are initiated by professionals. Organisations with more voluntary engagement and less 'unengaged' forms of volunteering are not more innovative, contrary to the hypotheses.

The results of the qualitative analysis can be found in [D3.4, Organisations that facilitate volunteering](#).

5. Policy recommendations

The policy brief summarizes the conclusions and offers important recommendations. Although volunteering is a desirable and beneficial activity, its impact should not be overestimated. In the third sector, decentralized organization forms can help to encourage bottom-up innovations.

This can be found in [D3.5, Policy brief on volunteering, its effects and circumstances](#).