5.5 Volunteer Work
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Productive Ageing in Europe – How Does the Societal Context Matter?

Today’s discussion about the growing “burden of ageing” must not neglect the substantial productive potential of the elderly population (e.g., O’Reilly and Caro 1994). The present contribution focuses on the participation of older Europeans in volunteer work, which can be defined as “unpaid work provided to parties to whom the worker owes no contractual, familial, or friendship obligations” (Wilson and Musick 1997: 694).

Many studies show that retirement does not necessarily result in higher participation rates (e.g., Murchler et al. 2003). However, “[w]hen it comes to hours of volunteering […] older men and women actually spend more time than do their younger counterparts, even when employment status is controlled” (Gallagher 1994: 576), suggesting that older volunteers are more highly committed than other age-groups. This is attributed to the fact that the productive nature of volunteering should be particularly beneficial for older people’s life-satisfaction or health (e.g., Siegrist et al. 2004).

Volunteering, though, should not be seen in isolation of the broader societal context in which it takes place: “as a cultural and economic phenomenon, volunteering is part of the way societies are organised, how they allocate social responsibilities, and how much engagement and participation they expect from citizens.” (Anheier and Salamon 1999: 43) So far, however, cross-nationally comparable data on active participation in volunteer work are scarce.

This contribution investigates cross-national patterns of volunteering among Europe’s population aged 50 and over. Moreover, the broad range of multidisciplinary information in SHARE allows us to provide (descriptive) statistics on the correlation between demographic, socio-economic, and health characteristics on the one hand, and participation in volunteer work on the other hand. Our conclusions stress the need to take a contextual perspective in future analyses of volunteering, and support policies and programs designed to encourage elderly citizens to make use of their productive potential – for the benefit of themselves and society.

Measuring Volunteer Work in SHARE

While many studies focus on membership in voluntary associations, we exploit information on whether the respondent has been actively engaged in voluntary or charity work during the month before the interview. Although membership is highly correlated with activity, the former measure might lead to an overestimation of actual engagement. Since volunteer work is often performed on a rather irregular basis and other studies’ retrospective questions regarding participation cover a longer period of time (e.g. the last year), our figures are even more likely to give a very conservative estimate of the prevalence of volunteering in the SHARE countries.

We use a binary indicator of volunteering (including charity work), which is complemented by information on the frequency of engagement and the individual’s motivation to do so (these variables are taken from a questionnaire module developed by the SHARE working group on ‘Well-being and social productivity’, lead by Johannes Siegrist). In addition, we consider a broad set of covariates in our analysis, including indicators of other social activities, demographic characteristics, education and employment status, as well as health variables. Further waves of SHARE will allow an investigation into more complex behavioural aspects of volunteer work and causal relationships.
Who Volunteers? Comparing Different Groups of Europe’s 50+

Volunteering – levels, frequency, motivations (see Table 5A.12 in the Appendix to this chapter for details): With regard to levels of volunteering, the SHARE countries may be divided into three groups (Figure 1). First, the Mediterranean ‘low participation’ countries, where 7 percent of the Italian and only 2-3 percent of the Greek and Spanish respondents engaged in volunteer work during the preceding month. Secondly, with 9-14 percent volunteers in the population 50+, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Austria exhibit medium activity levels. The remaining ‘high participation’ countries are, thirdly, Sweden and Denmark (where 17 percent report to have volunteered) and the Netherlands with more than 20 percent volunteers in the older population.

![Figure 1: Spatial pattern of participation in volunteer work](image)

Among those who report to have volunteered in the last month, almost one fifth (18 percent) has done so almost daily, nearly half of the volunteers have been engaged almost every week (47 percent), and slightly more than one third has worked less often (36 percent). Although a remarkably high share of Dutch volunteers has worked in almost every week (58 percent), there appears to be no correlation between the overall level of
volunteering in a country and the frequency of engagement. The two most frequently mentioned motivations to volunteer are the desire to contribute something useful (68 percent), followed by the joy derived from volunteering (56 percent). In some countries, e.g. in Sweden and the Netherlands, this rank order is reversed. Beyond the social value of their activity, many volunteers apparently expect an additional, non-monetary personal gain.

Other social activities and volunteering (see Table 5A.13 for details): The spatial pattern of the provision of informal help or care is very similar to the one observed for volunteering. On an overall higher level – 21 percent of the respondents report to have helped in the last month – we find substantially lower activity rates in the Mediterranean countries (from 7 percent in Spain to 17 percent in Greece) than in the Nordic countries (34 percent in Denmark and 41 percent in Sweden), for example. This is interesting, as help provided to family is at least partially covered here and one might rather have expected a reverse pattern with more helping or caring in southern Europe. Moreover, 27 percent of the SHARE sample participated in activities of an organisation. Despite significant cross-national variation, there is no clear spatial pattern of participation, though. While, for example, only about 15-20 percent of Italians and Spaniards took part in some kind of activity, almost half of the Greek and Swiss respondents (45-50 percent) were involved in an organisation’s activities.

With regard to the relationship between volunteering and other social activities, it is interesting to note that in all countries the share of volunteers among those who have helped or cared is between 1.5 (Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands) and more than two times (Italy, Greece) higher than in the general population. When turning to participation in organised activities, the respective factors are in most cases even somewhat larger. The association suggested here is also reflected in similarly higher shares of helpers and carers (participants, respectively) among those who report to have volunteered.

Demographic characteristics of volunteers (see Table 5A.14 for details): Gender differences in volunteering are generally small (in the order of 2 percentage points). While there is some tendency of men to be more active than women (particularly in Sweden and France), there are also exceptions like the Netherlands and Switzerland, where slightly higher shares of men engage in voluntary work. Variations in volunteering by partnership status are also small (on average by 2 percentage points), with some indication of a greater engagement among those who live with a partner versus those living alone (particularly so in Denmark and Germany, for example).

The age gradient of volunteer activity among the elderly is quite clear (Figure 2). In most countries, volunteering decreases only modestly between the two ‘younger’ age groups: from 12 percent among those who are 50-64 years old to 9 percent among respondents aged 65-74. While this decline in the share of volunteers till age 74 is stronger than the average in Austria and Italy (minus 6 percentage points), the Netherlands and France even exhibit an increase of 3-4 percentage points in that age group. However, when respondents age 75 or older are considered, activity rates drop by at least one third everywhere (in the Netherlands even by two thirds), to an average level of 5 percent. Still, in the Nordic countries as much as 12-13 percent of the population 75+ continue to be engaged in voluntary work.
Education and employment status of volunteers (see Table 5A.15 for details): The share of volunteers varies substantially between educational groups. Participation rates generally increase by almost 5 percentage points when respondents with a low degree are compared to those with a medium degree, and by another 7-8 percentage points when the highest educational group is considered. The gradient between the two latter groups is somewhat less pronounced in Sweden, Switzerland, and Austria. In the Netherlands, sizeable differences in volunteering by education can only be observed between the highly educated (29 percent) and those with a low or medium degree (about 20 percent).

In most countries, the share of volunteers differs only moderately between working, retired, and other non-working respondents (in the order of 2 percentage points). In Austria, Switzerland, and Italy, though, rates of volunteering are up to 5 percentage points (i.e. about one third) lower among retirees than among those who are engaged in market work. The reverse is true for France. In Switzerland, an exceptionally high share of 23 percent in the heterogeneous group of ‘other non-working’ report to have been active during the last month, which is more than double the share of volunteers among Swiss retirees.

Health and volunteering (see Table 5A.16 for details): Turning to volunteer work and health, we find much lower activity rates among those who perceive their current health status as fair or worse (about 6 percent), compared to those who report a good or better health condition (13 percent) (Figure 3). This negative association – which appears to be strongest in the Netherlands and somewhat less pronounced in Sweden – is corroborated by our Euro-D mental health indicator (cf. Section 3.5 in this volume). In almost all countries, the share of volunteers among respondents who showed symptoms of depression in the last month is 4-5 percentage points lower than among those who were not bothered by such problems. A similar, though weaker, relationship seems to exist between volunteering and chronic physical health problems.
Lessons from SHARE: Present State and Future Prospects of Voluntary Engagement in the Older Population

Our analysis of the SHARE data reveals a cross-national pattern of volunteering with higher participation rates in Northern Europe and substantially lower ones in the Mediterranean countries. This underlines the relevance of the broader social, institutional, and cultural background for private voluntary engagement. Even when controlling for sociodemographic characteristics in a multivariate logistic regression (details not shown here), we find strong indication for contextual effects on the probability to participate in volunteer work. These are suggested to be due to various cultural, institutional, and economic factors, which clearly need more detailed investigation in future analyses. Obviously, structural context is highly relevant both with regard to the opportunities for voluntary engagement and regarding the predominant concept of volunteering in a society. Across different national contexts, however, we find a remarkable consistency in the association of individual characteristics (health, etc.) with volunteering.

A significant share of up to 20 percent of Europe’s population aged 50 or older does engage in voluntary work – and its productive potential might not even be used to its full possible extent yet. This has also been recognised by policy makers, and the European Union, for example, has thus taken initiative to promote greater participation in voluntary work (cf. Commission of the European Communities 1997). Although such efforts should be welcomed, one should also not forget the limitations of the elderly population as a ‘reserve army of volunteers’. We find a clear negative association between participation in volunteer work on the one hand, and age and poor health on the other hand. Longitudinal data are badly needed to investigate this relationship in-depth.

With regard to future developments and policies, it will be important to what extent people will be able to age healthy, and in how far it will be possible to create ‘tailor-made’ work opportunities for older (and frailer) volunteers. A first step to achieve the latter could be to set up local institutions that match volunteers to organisations which might need them. Since people usually do not begin their volunteering career in later life, efforts to attract ‘new’ volunteers should also usefully focus on individuals in midlife who have not yet reached retirement age. As a final point, Siegrist et al. (2004: 13) note that “[c]reating
systems and opportunities in which motivations, efforts and rewards are marked by reciprocity seems to be of vital importance [...] in increasing meaningful participation, not least in view of their powerful implications for well-being and health.” It is therefore crucial to always keep in mind the beneficial aspect of volunteering for those who volunteer: older people shall not be ‘exploited’ for the benefit of others, but will hopefully experience a higher quality of life themselves through their active participation in society.

In sum, three main lessons can be learned from our analysis:

- Substantial regional variation in levels of volunteering exists between the countries under consideration, with higher activity rates in Northern Europe and lower ones in the Mediterranean countries.

- Across all SHARE countries, there is a remarkable consistency in the association of a broad range of individual characteristics, such as age or health, with volunteering.

- Although a significant share of Europe’s population 50+ already engages in voluntary work, its yet unused productive potential needs to be activated through specifically designed policies and programs.

References