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# Volunteering: Diplomacy's 'Secret Weapon'

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## Introduction

Volunteering and diplomacy share a long tradition as pillars of public relations-building and outreach. Both activities are respected as indispensable tools of communication, possessing the ability to adapt to the rapidly changing political climates within which they reside. Despite these similarities, volunteering and diplomacy find themselves travelling parallel to each other; they have the same goal, yet take different trajectories. Research into the utility of combining volunteer actions with diplomatic missions are few and far between, as are tangible applications of volunteering as a complimentary aide to diplomatic relationships across Europe. Recognising this disconnect, especially in the twilight of the COVID-19 pandemic and the buzz of public-sector activities in Europe, provides the perfect opportunity to assess volunteering's value as diplomacy's 'secret weapon'.

## Volunteering and Diplomacy: Pushing the Parallel Lines Together

To justifiably compare volunteering and diplomacy, it is necessary to first define each term concretely. Setting definitions of such wide topics allows not only for clarification in what each term distinctly represents, but it further allows complimentary links to be drawn between their features and functions. Within these comparisons lies the 'secret weapon' aspect of volunteering that could be applied to contemporary diplomatic practice.

Volunteering is best understood through its individuals; the volunteers. After all, volunteering starts with and is rightly defined by the individuals that freely choose to provide their respective services. Volunteering toes the line between being viewed as active work by some, and as leisure by others (Stebbins, 2013), most notably due to the unpaid factor of volunteering. In this way, some may choose to volunteer as an activity to fill in their free time, but for others it could be a valuable and accessible career move. This leisure aspect, known as 'voluntourism', only rightly depicts a small portion of global volunteer work; volunteering's defining features are, and will remain, ones of altruism and community-building, with the intention of providing a meaningful service to meaningful work.

Diplomacy's codification in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (VCDR) set the benchmark for deciding how diplomatic missions were to be carried out, detailing the functions of missions and the protective rights enjoyed by diplomats. Like volunteering, diplomacy shares similar community-building aspects, but instead of being produced through un-coerced action, diplomacy is a paid career. Diplomats are tasked with establishing 'missions' abroad with the intention of representing their state's interests, as stated in the VCDR's Third Article. Moreover, diplomats work across a range of different sectors, in the same way volunteer work does, adding further depth to the work both activities provide. Diplomacy is therefore best understood in this context as the paid maintenance and establishment of state-level governmental relations with other (non)governmental organisations.

It is worth acknowledging how both of the short overviews of volunteering and diplomacy above mention the payment (or no-payment) aspect of each practice. Financial transactions certainly do not define volunteering and diplomacy wholly, nor is it the main incentive of volunteers or diplomats in

pursuing their functions, yet it remains a relevant distinction to draw in brief between two remarkably similar activities.

Two comparisons stand out when distinguishing volunteering and diplomacy. The first comparison to draw between the two practices is the ‘individual/ organisation’ dynamic; the two actors within volunteering and diplomacy, the ‘individual’ (the volunteer, the diplomat) and the ‘organisation’ (the volunteering organisation or agency, the government sending the diplomat) form each work’s building blocks. This structural similarity, although featuring in the majority of public-outreach missions, provides value in the ‘secret weapon’ service volunteering can provide to diplomacy. The second comparison is understood as the ‘give and take’ dynamic, which details the ways in which volunteer action provides services within diplomatic practices, and what diplomats can take out of these experiences. This mutual engagement-leading-to-benefit is another ‘secret weapon’ to be uncovered.

## The Individual and the Organisation

Diplomatic practice has maintained that a diplomat’s position as a state representative is to be a peremptory feature of every mission, to the extent where Articles 3 (1a-e) of the VCDR assert the individual’s chief role in state representation. In this sense, it is strange to witness this aspect of depersonalisation within such an empathetic activity as diplomacy; relations-building requires balancing soft power and soft skills, all while maintaining one’s image as state representative. This interplay between individual and organisation is less prominent in volunteering. Volunteering enjoys the similar soft touches required in diplomacy, yet there is more expression and encouragement for the personalised aspects of the individual to integrate into their work – how can similar integrational practices feature in diplomacy?

Shifts toward acknowledging the individual behind both volunteering and diplomatic work have begun to emerge in policy and in practice. This is something to be learned from U.S. foreign policy, where the work provided by the Peace Corps volunteer programmes are a component of public diplomatic practice, described by Magu (2018) as ‘citizen diplomacy’. Recent developments have understood volunteering not as just an extension of public diplomacy, but claim volunteering to be public diplomacy itself (Tiessen & Lough, 2021), highlighting volunteering as an alternate replacement of old diplomatic tactics. Similar appreciations for voluntary diplomatic citizenship have been reflected in European diplomatic policies, which have relied on individual volunteering action to support continental endeavours. Included in the 2011 Policy Agenda for Volunteering in Europe (PAVE) was a recognition of “individual and collective” efforts made by volunteers in influencing policy frameworks across Europe. PAVE’s policy recommendations then developed into establishing the European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers, which similarly to the VCDR, detailed the definition, the functions, and the protections of volunteers during their time working.

The rights and responsibilities given to volunteers through the Volunteering Charter acknowledges the ‘individual/ organisation’ dynamic shared between volunteering and diplomacy. Concerning diplomatic endeavours, the codified protective rights given to volunteers could serve as a further

incentive for joint voluntary-diplomatic missions; volunteers engaging in international development programmes would consequently work to further diplomatic relations. Utilising this trend to further diplomatic relations on an inter-continental scale would continue to promote integrative political endeavours across Europe. This mission would start with mutual 'individual/ organisational' recognition and encouragement.

### **'Give and Take' or 'Taking for Granted'?**

Expanding beyond the 'individual/ organisation' dynamic, volunteering and diplomacy share the positive aspect of genuinely wanting to develop relations. Volunteer action, as previously detailed, requires active, un-coerced participation on the volunteers end, and governments engage in diplomatic relations to mutually benefit each state. This second complementary feature of volunteering and diplomacy can be understood as the 'give and take' dynamic; actors 'give' a service (litter picking, communiqué signing etc.), and 'take' back something in return (work experience, satisfaction from community service, a new economic connection etc.). This begs the question, what can volunteering give to diplomacy, what can diplomacy take from volunteering, and vice versa?

One lesson diplomatic practice could take from volunteering lies in comparing the lengths of voluntary and diplomatic services. Despite usually featuring as a criticism of volunteering, wherein volunteers may experience a hard time adjusting after their time abroad (Bennett et al., 2018), the short-term aspect of volunteering may provide diplomatic practice the space to employ its overlooked soft skills. Regular diplomatic missions in the UK Diplomatic Service last for three years, whereas volunteer schemes have a wider range dependent on the voluntary action performed, from a couple of weeks as a teaching assistant to 24 months as a Peace Corps volunteer. Of course, certain diplomatic missions require these long-term stations, yet there lies value in the short-term aspect of volunteering. Combining volunteer action within diplomatic missions may serve as a means through which states could employ specialised volunteers to supplement specific needs. For example, a permanent representation between two EU states may require short-term problem solving in the event of tense relations or heightened security; perhaps a terrorist attack has happened in a capital, and foreign EU citizens within that state require support. In this case, diplomats could employ voluntary diplomats as branches of public diplomacy, wherein short-term delegation is used to maintain relations and to serve an immediate good.

The issue with this example lies in the extent to which volunteers' actions would be taken for granted, both by diplomatic missions and by the public. As individuals provide a service without financial coercion, organisations may arrive at the dystopian conclusion of viewing volunteers as free workers through which their undesirable tasks may be delegated. This is a fairly extreme outcome; as explored in the last section, volunteers' individual rights and protections have become well-documented and well-practised across the European continent since PAVE's conception. In such a respected and protected career as diplomacy, further considerations would be made for the volunteer diplomats supplementing public diplomatic demands. As is commonplace with most recommendations, it is best to err on the side of caution when proposing new changes to old

practice; newer policies combining voluntary and diplomatic services' mutual functions and protections could therefore be drafted to regulate collaborative efforts.

A second issue arises within participation in voluntary diplomatic activities. Applicants may dwindle in light of diplomats assuming volunteers' aid, or there may be an imbalance in the amount of volunteers required for diplomatic missions. Lee and Won (2017) assess the uniqueness of voluntary participation in international organisations, as opposed to other forms of development aid. In particular, Lee and Won observed that volunteers are subject to a range of specialised motivations that determine whether they choose to participate in voluntary work or not. As stated in the generalised definition of volunteering provided in the first section of this report, volunteers share a desire and willingness to develop community-building as their primary *modus operandi* for engaging in volunteering. This desire, however, is supported by supplementary individual motivations: if you lean more towards providing healthcare support to members of your community, you would be less likely to engage in diplomatic volunteering schemes than a politics graduate.

These issues do not break any opportunities to develop volunteering techniques within diplomatic practice, rather, they strengthen it. Understanding potential pitfalls in volunteer service allows for academics and organisations alike to pre-predict any shortcomings that may occur during a voluntary diplomat's service. In this way, organisations looking to employ volunteers can assess where the fluctuating demands and motivations of each individual lies, allowing for an even allocation of volunteers where appropriate. These volunteers would further work under a set of specialised rules and regulations, allowing for their work to be protected while on mission.

Recognising the 'secret weapon' volunteers could provide to the diplomatic service has begun to actualise in different forms of public policy. Sobocinska (2017) draws comparisons between Australia, America, and the UK's graduate schemes for international development volunteering, detailing how their history has led to the appreciation of volunteers' work in global development systems. Sobocinska criticises each state's claim to building development volunteering as inherently colonialist, yet this criticism could aid in informing European practices. Joint European efforts in opportunity-providing volunteering schemes, as present in the Institut de Recherche et d'Information sur le Volontariat, recognise the utility of involving young people in Europe within developmental practices. Extending this 'secret weapon' to diplomatic missions would further serve to improve intercontinental community-building schemes across Europe.

## **Technique and Practice Recommendations: Employing the Secret Weapon**

Having assessed the ways that a diplomatic voluntary scheme could be implemented across Europe, it is now necessary to propose how these actions should become actualised. It has already been established that the 'secret weapon' of individual volunteers is indispensable to diplomatic missions that wish to both improve upon their soft skills and develop specialised relations-building schemes. It has further been asserted that in order to realise this 'secret weapon', protective provisions must be made within European policy in specific reference to diplomatic volunteers.

Techniques employed by volunteers and diplomats in reaching their mutual goal of community building no longer need to travel parallel to each other. Clear crossovers have already been made between volunteer action and diplomatic practice; crossovers which have been rising in demand and prevalence during the COVID-19 pandemic. The requirement of interconnectivity schemes COVID produced for citizens globally would be reinforced with the introduction of developed volunteer diplomat schemes. COVID's continued prevalence in global communities halted physical communications between states, subsequently building a renewed appreciation for the relations that once were.

Recommending proposals such as a continental voluntary diplomatic scheme would fortify already strengthened bonds across European policy making and diplomatic endeavours. Individuals and organisations alike, recognising their mutual value, are able to give and take techniques from each distinct practice and employ a joint effort towards European diplomatic development. Through these efforts, the 'secret weapon' at the heart of individual volunteers would become less of a secret, and grow to become a treasured integrational practice.

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