Accessibility to volunteering opportunities:

an investigation into the barriers to volunteering for people with a disability.

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Introduction

Throughout Europe, and worldwide, various studies have identified the value of volunteering and investigated the demographics of the people who take part in formal and non-formal volunteering. As such, there is ongoing evidence of the under-representation of disadvantaged groups in volunteering, particularly those living in deprived areas and those with longer term health problems or a disability (Scottish Government, 2019). Therefore, this report will aim to address this topic, in relation to the accessibility to volunteering opportunities for people with a disability. Firstly, the current situation regarding volunteer participation, the benefits of volunteering, and opportunities for people with a disability will be discussed and investigated, with a focus on western European countries, while also taking into consideration relevant information and case studies from other European regions and worldwide, including, Czech Republic, Russia and Australia, in order to provide a broad oversight into this subject. Following on from this, the barriers which may prevent people with a disability from engaging in volunteering will be identified and analysed in order to then discuss the ways in which these barriers could be minimised or overcome, which will then be further investigated through research from two example case studies of inclusive volunteering.

Background

Firstly, it is important to note that people with a disability tend to be seen as passive recipients of volunteering, however people with a disability, like people without a disability, can make valuable contributions to society through volunteering (CEV, 2010). Engaging in volunteering also offers the opportunity of expression and active engagement and the provision of accessible volunteering opportunities is particularly important, given that people with disabilities generally have to face numerous challenges that undermine their independence and thus, their quality of life. In 2019, statistics (Eurostat, 2019) report that only 50.8% of people with disabilities are in employment compared to 75% without disabilities. Moreover, the rate of inactive people with disabilities is 37.6% while it is 17.6% for people without disabilities. This leads to a greater risk of poverty and social exclusion, for example, in 2021, 29.7 % of the EU population with a disability was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 18.8 % among people with no limitations (Eurostat, 2022). As such, the engagement of people with disabilities in volunteering organisations and activities represents an effective way to tackle the above-mentioned problems, fostering social inclusion and more active citizenship.

Furthermore, studies show that volunteering brings advantages not only by contributing to the goals of the project or organisation in which the volunteer is participating in, and thus contributing to society, but also brings benefits to the volunteer on an individual basis. These benefits often include gaining skills and knowledge, improvements to mental health (Marková, 2020) as well as community engagement, communication skills (CEV, 2023), and a sense of belonging and accomplishment (Campolieti, Gomez and Gunderson, 2009). Moreover, a study from the USA has shown that, specifically, benefits of volunteering to participants with disabilities include pride, skill development, empowerment (Rider and Hall, 2002). Therefore, these benefits and skills gained from volunteering can improve the quality of life, minismise the risk of social exclusion and equip participants with skills for future opportunities including employment.

Additionally, despite the fact that people with disabilities are generally willing and able to volunteer (CEV, 2023); (Lindsay, 2015) with common motivations being "to remain active and busy, help people, gain work experience, meet people and 'pay back' for the support received from their community" (Yanay-Ventura, 2019) , studies show that, throughout Europe, and worldwide, those who could benefit most from volunteering are the least likely to be able to take part in it. This imbalance represents the equivalent of an inverse care law (Volunteering matters, 2017), which refers to the principle that the availability of good medical or social care tends to vary inversely with the needs of the population served (Haines, Pollock, and Victora, 1971). Therefore, this also highlights the importance of this issue, especially, given that, if the access issues and barriers to volunteering endure, calls to increase volunteering could actually increase inequalities for disadvantaged groups, such as persons with a disability (Volunteering Matters, 2017). This is due to the likelihood that people with disabilities are excluded or overlooked from general calls for volunteers, or face limited access to the volunteering opportunities due to the barriers to volunteering which will be later identified in this report. As such, the endurance of inaccessible volunteering opportunities consequently means that people with disabilities would lack gaining from the benefits of volunteering and remain at greater risk of social exclusion.

Participation rates of volunteers with a disability

This issue can be seen through volunteering statistics, and, while volunteering rates vary greatly in different countries, and regions of Europe, due to various reasons, including east-west differences, social capital and religious practice (Voicu and Voicu, 2009), it remains clear that there is common evidence for underrepresentation of people with a disability in volunteer roles. It is important to consider that there are differences in how these statistics are gathered, and the definitions each country uses to define participation in volunteering, however, we can see this evidence in data from various countries

For example, in Scotland the volunteering rate in 2017 was only 13% for those with a long-term health condition or disability, in comparison to the national volunteering rate of 28%. (Scottish Government, 2019), which can also be seen worldwide such as in the USA, only 5.4% of volunteers had a disability, in comparison to the 19% of the population that have a disability (Rider and Hall, 2002). Similarly, in Russia, 55.3% of people with disabilities don't have experience in volunteer groups, but want to acquire it (Gorlova, et. Al, 2016,), which highlights the disparity between motivation to volunteer and the inaccessibility to opportunities. Furthermore, the existence of barriers to volunteering is highlighted by UK Government (2021) data in which 33.8% of people with a disability said they were limited a little, and 22.9% said they were limited a lot.

However, in contrast, in Spain, a study shows that 10% of participants in volunteering have a disability, which corresponds with their national rate of disability in the population (Platforma del voluntario de España, 2022). This highlights an interesting case study within Europe, which could be due various factors which have reduced the barriers, including the implementation of effective State Strategies on Disability (2022) and on Volunteering (2014) and the actions of organisations such as Plena Inclusión in Spain which supports people with disabilities in various sectors, including advice and support to find volunteering opportunities (Plena inclusión, 2023). Concepts such as these will be further discussed in the strategies to overcome or minimise the barriers to volunteering for people with a disability section of this report.

Despite the varied volunteering rates between countries, and the varied levels of data surrounding this issue, in the EU, around 87 million people have some form of disability (European commission, 2023), which highlights the widespread importance of improving accessibility to volunteering roles for people with a disability. This is especially important due to the greater risk of social exclusion and poverty that people with a disability face when opportunities for social inclusion and active citizenship, such as volunteering, remain inaccessible.

Barriers to volunteering for people with a disability

Therefore, it is important to identify and discuss the barriers which may be limiting the engagement in volunteering for people with a disability. The most recent general data from adults in the UK who do not volunteer regularly indicate work commitments are the biggest barrier, other reasons include childcare commitments, doing other things, not knowing about volunteering opportunities, study commitments, looking after an elderly family member, disability, and age (Volunteering Matters, 2017). Here we can see that disability can be cited as a barrier, however, it is often not the disability itself which forms the barrier, but rather, the other limitations which can augment the barriers for those with a disability.

Firstly, according to the social model of disability "people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference" (Scope, 2023). Barriers can be physical, like buildings not having accessible toilets, physical access to the premises, lack of information, transport issues and costs (Scottish government, 2019). These **physical barriers** can have a particularly significant impact on people with a disability due to a lack of accessible volunteering opportunities (CEV, 2023). As VERA studies have shown, it has been widely reported that volunteering environments, such as buildings and workspaces are often inaccessible to people with disabilities (CEV, 2023) and people with disabilities have difficulties arranging suitable transportation, an issue that may often be overlooked by organisations. This may require an accessible public transport route, an accompanying trusted person to support travel, financial support for taxis, or other measures, to ensure that people with a disability can reach locations to be able to actively engage in volunteering . Finding transportation and having accessible workspaces is critical to finding and maintaining volunteer positions. Therefore, "physical access to the workplace was seen as a barrier to those with limited mobility becoming volunteers" (Balandin et. al, 2006), as well as lack of information about access, and transport difficulties that also form significant physical barriers to people with a disability engaging in volunteering.

Secondly, there are also **structural barriers** which can limit the opportunities for people with a disability to volunteer. According to a publication by the Scottish government, structural barriers can include bureaucracy, inflexibility of offer, undesirable tasks, lack of access to equipment, lack of support and organisation (Scottish Government, 2019), and specifically, access to volunteering opportunities is a key factor influenced by structural barriers cited by people with disabilities (Southby and South, 2016). For example, while volunteering can be a way for individuals to boost their personal, social, and cultural resources in order to overcome social exclusion, volunteering also requires access to some resources to take part (Southby and South, 2016). The lack of sufficient personal resources may cause a greater barrier to those with a disability than those without, due to the existing gap of economic opportunities, and greater risk of poverty that people with a disability face. Therefore, due to this structural barrier of resources, people with a disability are less likely to be able to volunteer, and thus less likely receive the benefits that come from voluntary engagement.

This is also true of the resources of an organisation, as discussed by Rider and Hall (2002), it is "unlikely that these organisations can afford to pay for additional resources, including training for their staff or equipment for the person with a disability". This is affirmed by CEV (2023) who have found that organisations have also reported feeling that it is difficult to coordinate volunteer positions for people with physical, sensory and/or mental disabilities and that they lacked the training to accommodate them, which highlights the possible inflexibility of organisations, but also a lack of appropriate resources, equipment, support and training which therefore limits the opportunities for people with a disability to engage with volunteering within organisations.

Additionally, there are also barriers which can be categorized as **emotional barriers** (Scotland, 2019), which covers aspects such as lack of confidence, not knowing what to expect, not feeling welcomed or valued, stigma, stereotypes, and fear. This occurs as some groups may be anxious about putting themselves forward due to the stigma in society which can result in, specifically, people with disabilities being prevented from participating in volunteering activities (volunteering matters, 2017). As such, stigma and disablist attitudes of others can be significant barriers, based upon perceptions, and misconceptions that people with a disability have little to offer, or that supporting someone with a disability to volunteer will be too much effort (Southby and South, 2016), or that they "lack skills and are unreliable" (CEV, 2023) caused by people's attitudes to difference.(Scope, 2023).

Furthermore, according to research by Balandin et al. (2006), participants pointed out that both clients and staff in volunteer-involving organisations may hold disablist attitudes, which may occur through conscious or unconscious bias, but results in volunteers with a disability being treated differently from other volunteers. This can lead to volunteers with disabilities feeling excluded and stigmatised. Therefore, the existence of disability attitudes within society, and within organisations, can increase the prevalence of people with disabilities expressing concerns about participating outside of known 'safe' spaces, meaning that they would be less likely to engage in these opportunities such as volunteering.

From this, it can be seen that the lack of participation in volunteering reflects broader exclusionary forces inherent to contemporary social structures (Southby and South, 2016) and wider structures of inequality, (Scottish Government, 2019), in addition to the structural and physical barriers that affect, disproportionately, people with a disability. As such, change in this area is linked to wider social policy, and according to Scottish government publication, there is no single lever that will result in increased and improved volunteering opportunities for people with a disability. As such, the following section of this report will discuss the possible strategies to overcome or minimise the barriers **physical, structural and emotional** to volunteering for people with a disability.

Strategies to overcome or minimise the barriers to volunteering for people with a disability

Firstly, given the "inherent flexibility" of volunteering, due to the range of roles, opportunities and commitment level, by adopting an innovative approach (Linning and Maltman, 2019), it can be ensured that there are diverse, quality, and inclusive opportunities for everyone to get involved and stay involved (Scottish Government, 2019). This can, in part, be achieved by integrating volunteering into wider social policy responses to social change (Linning and Maltman, 2019), which would particularly work towards mitigating the emotional barriers, based upon the stigma and societal attitudes of people with a disability.

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However, due to the range of physical, structural, and emotional barriers, as well as the wide variety of volunteering opportunities, it is necessary for planned and coordinated action and investment across all sectors and by multiple partners to tackle barriers and build new approaches. This would need to include leaders of communities and in the third sector, national and local government, the public sector and businesses (Scottish Government, 2019).

Moreover, considering the benefits of volunteering, in relation to community engagement, there are strategies which could be developed, or expanded, on a local level to directly correlate to these benefits within communities. For example, in England, Volunteering Matters (2016) works in partnership with local organisations and businesses to help people with disabilities to actively volunteer, offering support placements in various work environments, and partnering with national campaigns such as the English Federation of Disability Sport, #TogetherWeWill, campaign. This highlights the importance of cooperation between sectors and organisations, on a national, regional, and local level, in order to achieve wider opportunities for accessible volunteering. Additionally, as previously mentioned, in Spain, the organisation Plena inclusión which, amongst other roles, supports people with a disability in finding suitable volunteering opportunities is formed from various organisations, covering all regions of Spain. Plena inclusión (2023) is also supported through economic financing and collaboration in projects and programs by various institutions including the EU, and the Spanish Government through various ministries including the ministry of social rights and agenda. This example from Spain highlights the effectiveness of collaboration in order to create, maintain and promote inclusive volunteering opportunities, and on a wider scale, an inclusive society.

Furthermore, in order to improve the accessibility to volunteering, it is important to recognise and expand existing entry points into volunteering for members of underrepresented communities, while at the same time taking a whole community approach ensures that opportunities are accessible to all. A report by Volunteering Matters (2017) suggests that this should be done in a 'volunteer centred way', especially as people with long-standing disability are keen to volunteer but recognize that they may need additional support to do so successfully (Baladin et. Al, 2006). This approach includes supporting volunteers, based on their interests and needs, rather than those of the organisation or provider. This could be achieved through mentorships or meeting with the volunteering organisation to ensure that the interests and needs of each volunteer are directly recognised and addressed. Therefore, this could minimise the physical and structural barriers to people with a disability as their specific needs would be supported.

For example, at the most fundamental level, the physical environment must be accessible to people with a disability. This includes not only accessible premises but also accessible and affordable public transport. This may require environmental adaptation, (Balandin et al. 2006) which in the UK, organisations are required by law to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that the environment is adapted to enable volunteers with a disability to carry out their role in the same way as other volunteers (Conner, 2023).

Reasonable adjustments could include that volunteers may require written material to be produced in large print or in Braille or require a desk with an adjustable height to accommodate the height which a wheelchair sits at, as well as accessible facilities to enter a building (Conner, 2023). These aspects of environmental adaptation, which would mitigate the physical barriers to volunteering, would also require planning, resources, and funding, which links to the structural barriers. However, by working in a "volunteer centred" way, and making these reasonable and meaningful changes, based on the principle that the volunteers individual needs should be recognised and addressed, the accessibility would be greatly improved for people with a disability.

Moreover, a key strategy to mitigate these structural barriers to volunteering is centred on training (Balandin et. Al, 2006) given that, according to the VERA project, these barriers show the need for a training course to help organisations involve more people with disabilities as volunteers (CEV, 2023). Linked to the structural barriers to volunteering, limited organisational resources result in reduced or limited training opportunities. However, sufficient training is essential for volunteers to perform their role appropriately, as well as sufficient training for managers and coordinators on how to effectively engage volunteers. Specifically, training coordinators on supporting volunteers with disabilities could significantly mitigate some of the structural or emotional barriers, as coordinations would be more aware of the methods to increase the accessibility of their organisations volunteer programs. This training may need to be adapted for different volunteers, with or without disabilities. That is to say, implementing a volunteer centred training approach in order to achieve the most effective outcomes for individuals.

Additionally, coordinators and organisations working with volunteers need to be clear about the voluntary role requirements and provide opportunities to trial the voluntary job (Balandin et. Al, 2006), which would then provide an opportunity for both organizers and participants to identify any areas which may need adaptation, in order to mitigate further physical and structural barriers. This could also be achieved through methods such as a volunteering toolkit (Activity alliance, 2023), or volunteer resource centres (Balandin et. Al, 2006) to bring together and share good practice across the consortium and deliver training and support to ensure volunteers are having the best possible impact (Activity alliance, 2023). Additionally, Balandin et. al's (2006) investigation in Australia suggests one-off grants to assist community organisations to make their premises accessible.

While the source of this grant would have to be defined, the implementation of a system such as this could benefit both members of the public utilizing the services of the organisation, and volunteers with physical disability, and would mitigate the structural issue of limited resources while using the funds to mitigate physical access barriers of the premises.

Case Studies

The success of these strategies can be seen in cases of organisations which have successfully implemented volunteering opportunities for people with disabilities. For example, in the case of young people with disabilities joining the European Solidarity Corps, various measures have been put in place in this programme so that people with disabilities can benefit from the volunteering experience. These measures include a preparatory visit ahead of the project and financial support for costs linked to disability and reinforced mentorship (Dicsi, 2022). Additionally, the Corps provides accessible and flexible formats of activities, and a range of support measures to better cater for their specific needs (European Disability Forum, 2022). Measures such as these have a significant role in combating the barriers to volunteering for people with a disability as they encourage a volunteer centred approach in which specific physical or emotional barriers can be addressed in these preparatory visits and with mentors, and the financial support and flexible format can reduce aspects of structural barriers.

Furthermore, we can look at the case of the volunteer program for the Sochi 2014 winter Olympic games in Russia, which was marked "barrier-free" for participation of people with disabilities (Gorlova, N. I. et al., 2016). This was achieved through the Organizing Committee making the necessary effort to eliminate stereotypes about people with disabilities, in order to develop an inclusive culture and, and to promote ethically consistent and correct terminology in society. As such, this program worked towards mitigating the emotional barriers associated with volunteering for people with a disability, as well as creating wide scale visibility, recognising the contributions of volunteers with disabilities. This program was aimed at increasing integration and socialization of people with disabilities through involvement in voluntary activities, in order to develop their inclusion in work, life and leisure and overcome isolation. This was achieved through various strategies, such as a mentor who connects opportunities for volunteers with a disability with the requirements of the job, while solving all arising problems in the process, as well as adopting methods of the inclusive volunteering model and equal opportunities. For example, the provision of "barrier-free communication" through the establishment of communication channels, as well as adapting to an equipped workplace, flexible working hours, a development of a program of introductory events and training, the provision of necessary technical help, transportation to the event and support for volunteers with disabilities in the early stages of the work; providing volunteers with supervisions during working shifts (Gorlova, N. I. et al., 2016).

The implementation of these strategies highlights the varied, and wide-ranging aspects which need to be considered in order to effectively mitigate physical, structural and emotional barriers to volunteering for people with a disability. However, these cases also highlight the realistic possibility to create barrier-free volunteering opportunities, particularly in large organisations such as EU programs and the olympic games. However, it can be argued that the implementation of similar strategies, particularly within smaller organisations with less resources, could be achieved through cooperation between local communities, larger organisations, institutions and through developments in social policy. As such, these physical, structural and emotional barriers could be overcome. This can be achieved on a regional, national, or local level, in order to increase the accessibility of opportunities for all people with a disability to volunteer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, given the research which highlights the benefits of volunteering, and the risks of social exclusion when these opportunities remain inaccessible, it is important that all groups of people have access to suitable volunteering opportunities. It is generally clear that, throughout Europe and worldwide, people with a disability are facing barriers which limit their opportunities to engage in volunteering, shown by the lower volunteering rates among these groups, despite their recorded willingness to become involved. As such, these barriers can be identified as physical, structural and emotional. While some barriers, such a physical, can be mitigated through reasonably simple environmental adaptation, the structural limitations, such as lack of resources, can also limit these changes, as well as creating other barriers. Meanwhile, emotional barriers are augmented by stereotypes and attitudes within society. As such, it is necessary that there is cooperation between various sectors and organisations in order to effectively combat all three types of barrier, for example through training, planning and adaptation, and case studies such as European Solidarity Corps and the volunteer program at the Sochi 2014 games can demonstrate this, with strategies that could be applicable on a wider scale so that people with a disability have the opportunity to volunteer, without being restricted by barriers.

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