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The power of volunteering: you make me happy and I make you happy



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Millions of people across the world work for voluntary organisations and invest their abundant energies into helping their communities. Historically, establishments of voluntary organisations date back to at least the nineteenth century, when some of the world's largest voluntary organisations, such as the Red Cross, were established to help people in need for free. To date, volunteer work remains a popular activity among the public worldwide. The [World Giving Index](#) (<https://www.cafonline.org/about-us/publications/2014-publications/world-giving-index-2014>) indicates that, globally, 21% of individuals volunteered in 2013, with Americans recording the highest volunteer participation rate of 44% in developed countries.

Why do people work for free in the first place?

Some argue that people volunteer because they enjoy an increase in the well-being of others, while others argue that people volunteer because the act of giving in itself makes them happy, among others. In fact, statistical evidence shows that, relative to non-volunteers, volunteers are on average happier, more satisfied with their lives, less depressed, and report better health. However, this evidence doesn't necessarily imply that volunteer work "causes" to improve the well-being of volunteers. It could be the case that those who are happier and healthier may be participating in volunteer work in the first place. To address this point and investigate whether volunteer work causes an increase in the well-being of volunteers, [Meier and Stutzer](#) (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0335.2007.00597.x/abstract>) studied the effects on well-being of an abrupt decline in volunteer opportunities in the East Germany. After the German reunification, many organisations, such as sports clubs and publicly owned firms, which used to provide volunteer opportunities collapsed, and a large number of people were forced to stop volunteering. Based on a comparison of people who lost their volunteer opportunities and those who didn't, the former was found to experience a decline in life satisfaction.

What about the benefits to the recipients of volunteer service?

[An attempt is made to answer this question](#) (<http://www.oxfordjournals.org/page/6726/6>) by studying the consequences of an unexpected increase in the number of volunteers following an earthquake in Japan. In 1995, the city of Kobe was hit by an earthquake of a magnitude of 7.3 which took away the lives of over 6,400 people. Shortly after the earthquake, a large number of volunteers gathered in the disaster area to provide emergency support. Roughly 1.4 million people volunteered over the year following the earthquake, approximately 70% of whom were volunteering for the first time. The large-scale volunteer activities following the earthquake were broadcast as a new social phenomenon in Japan, and subsequently served to popularise volunteer activity, as is demonstrated by the fact that the year 1995 is called "volunteer gannen", meaning "the starting year of volunteerism."

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Focusing on volunteers who provide the elderly with informal care, such as visits to homes for a chat and assistance with daily tasks, it was found that the number of volunteers considerably increased in the municipalities hit by the earthquake. In contrast, other municipalities which were not damaged didn't experience such a sharp increase. Based on a comparison of elderly mortality between the municipalities that recorded no or little loss of life because of the earthquake but experienced a sharp increase in the number of volunteers, and the nearby municipalities that weren't hit by the earthquake, the voluntary provision of informal care was found to reduce elderly mortality. Supplementary analysis suggests that the reduction in mortality was likely caused by an improvement in general health conditions of the elderly.

These findings have important policy implications for societies facing growing needs of healthcare for their ageing population. Europe, where the percentage of population aged 65 or older is projected to almost double to approximately 30% from 2010 to 2050, is a case in point. These findings suggest that governments facing ageing populations can consider encouraging volunteer work as a way to provide the elderly with support. To the extent that volunteering for the elderly improves health conditions of care recipients, it

potentially helps mitigate an increase in public health spending. In addition, aside from helping the elderly, volunteers may improve the efficiency of the healthcare sector. Volunteers potentially help free up the time of more formally-trained (paid) workers, who can then reallocate their time to perform tasks requiring their special skills. For example, by leaving tasks that don't need specialised health-care skills to volunteers, such as visiting the elderly and providing them with daily support, more trained workers, such as social workers, may be able to devote their time to counsel the elderly who lost independence because of ill health, for instance.

King's College Hospital in London is an example of hospitals that work closely with volunteer workers, each of them devoting at least three hours a week for six months. Volunteers visit wards for a chat, run errands for patients, and help patients settle in at home after a hospital stay to help patients feel comfortable in their difficult times. Ward visitor, [Chris Baldwin](https://careers.kch.nhs.uk/working/why-kings/volunteers) (<https://careers.kch.nhs.uk/working/why-kings/volunteers>), who has been volunteering for the hospital over 25 years says, "I meet the most amazing people and I feel it is a privilege to be able to help them. I can't recommend being a volunteer at King's highly enough – it makes me get up in the morning as it is so rewarding!"

There appears to be a huge potential of volunteering still to be used in society to make both who give and receive happier.

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Yu Aoki (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/business/research/profiles/y.aoki>) is Assistant Professor in Economics at the University of Aberdeen. She works on applied micro-econometrics in the fields of labour, education, and health economics. She is the author of the article '[Donating time to charity: working for nothing?](http://oep.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2016/09/26/oep.gpw048.full)' (<http://oep.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2016/09/26/oep.gpw048.full>) in *Oxford Economic Papers* (<http://oep.oxfordjournals.org/>).

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