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NGO volunteering

NGO volunteering as a first rung strategy for tackling youth unemployment

by Sara Compion

In South Africa, youth volunteering as a mechanism for young people to gain work experience and to be drawn into the economy has not been sufficiently researched and documented. As South Africa continues to experience chronically high youth unemployment rates, it is clear that a multipronged effort, involving both the public and private sectors, is required to support young people as they transition into the world of work. Here, we take a closer look at the key elements

of youth volunteer programmes and we begin to consider how organisations – in particular, non-governmental organisations (NGO) – might be encouraged to embrace this practice as a viable first rung strategy for tackling youth unemployment.

What is a youth volunteer programme?

Youth volunteer programmes – also sometimes referred to as service placements – span a broad

Types of youth volunteer programmes

National Youth Service is a structured programme defined by the International Association for National Youth Service as, “an organised activity in which young people serve others and the environment in ways that contribute positively to society, in line with national development goals.”

Service Learning refers to service programmes that form a part of a curriculum or a field of study and are compulsory in nature. Here service is intended to complement the classroom experience and to balance the service objectives with ensuring that the desired learning outcomes are achieved.

Internship refers to job-training opportunities offered by an employer to potential employees, to work at an organisation for a fixed, limited period of time. Most internships are temporary and last for anywhere between one week and twelve months. These positions may be paid or unpaid. Interns are usually college or university students, high school students, or post-graduate adults.

Learnership refers to a “structured work-based learning process for gaining theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the workplace leading to a nationally recognised qualification registered on the South African NQF – for example an accountant, construction worker, health care worker, IT technician or motor mechanic. Learners attend classes at a college or training centre, and complete on-the-job training in a workplace. It is outcomes-based and not time-based and allows for recognition of prior learning. Learnership duration varies but the average is about 18 months.

Sources:

- Petriwskyj, A. and Warburton, J. 2007. “Redefining Volunteering for the Global Context: A Measurement Matrix for Researchers.” In *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, 12 (1): 7-13.
- The International Association for National Youth Service (IANYS). Available online at <http://www.icicp.org/what-we-do/innovative-projects/ianys/>. Also see <http://www.icicp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Bellagio-IANYS-Conference.pdf>, Accessed December 2014.
- MERSETA. 1997. *Learnerships – MERSETA website*. Available online at <http://www.merseta.org.za/SkillsDevelopment/LearningProgrammes/Learnerships.aspx>, accessed December 2014.
- National Youth Commission (1998) *Green Paper on National Youth Service*. Pretoria: National Youth Commission.

range of activities in the socio-cultural, political and economic environments. Its purpose is to create opportunities for young people to help others by contributing to the development of communities, while also developing their own skills and abilities, and expanding their experiences. These programmes are offered in a number of ways, including: National Youth Service, Service Learning, Internships, Learnerships and NGO Youth Volunteer placements.

Taking a closer look at NGO Youth Volunteer Programmes

NGO youth volunteer programmes are generally informally structured. Young people between the ages of 18 – 25 years (roughly) are placed in an NGO for a period of three to twelve months and agree to volunteer to help the organisation fulfil its goals and mission. These are usually fulltime appointments.

Many volunteer programmes will provide some structured training or mentoring component for the young participants. Before placement, they may be required to undergo a workplace orientation where the volunteer terms are explained and agreed upon, while during their placement they are supported by regular motivation and mentoring sessions.

The daily activities of volunteers, and how the programme is structured, may also vary. Overall, the outcome always aims to have benefits for the young participant, the host organisation, and the social cause/beneficiary community. As such, Petriwskyj and Warburton¹ suggest that a volunteer placement programme should be characterised by the following four key features:

1. it involves an element of useful service or productive work
2. it is directed at other people outside the immediate family/household
3. it is not compulsory, or coerced or forced externally by law or others
4. while there may be some reimbursement or

other financial payments, it is not undertaken primarily for financial gain, and the payments in monetary terms are usually less than the economic value of the labour.

Why host youth volunteers?

Youth volunteer programmes – when located in NGOs – must be understood as creating environments that can offer young people opportunities to experience alternatives to mainstream forms of higher education, build their social capital, expand their potential for tolerance, and develop their role in contributing to social cohesion and improvement of their communities.

There is also an argument to be made that NGO volunteer programmes provide alternate job training to mainstream internships and learnerships, and present additional educational avenues for

those individuals not incorporated into the formal higher education system. Given South Africa's high youth unemployment rate, the importance and value of creating such opportunities cannot be underestimated. By hosting youth volunteers, NGOs play a potentially significant role in guiding young people to expand their choices to lead lives they have reason to value; and in empowering them with hope to tackle challenges and build a new future for their communities and for themselves².

Volunteering includes the “unpaid non-compulsory work; activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside their own household.”

Source: International Labour Organisation. 2011. Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work.

The importance of opportunity

Young people are disengaged because of a sense of powerlessness and irrelevance as opposed to apathy or disinterest. Overcoming these requires access to opportunities for participation as individuals, as well as a generation. Young peoples' sense of efficacy increases when they are connected to issues that matter, and key civic actors and institutions are encouraged to see young people as valuable resources. Meaningful opportunities to participate must be provided today to secure tomorrow.

(Source: South African National Youth Commission, 2003:8)

¹ Petriwskyj, A. and Warburton, J. 2007. "Redefining Volunteering for the Global Context: A Measurement Matrix for Researchers." In *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, 12 (1): 7-13

² UNDP. 2010. *Human Development Report 2010, 20th Anniversary Edition*. New York: UNDP

What are the benefits of youth volunteer programmes?

Youth volunteer programmes have a range of benefits for the individual youth, the host organisations, and the broader community.

Benefits to the individual youth (Private value): For young people, volunteer programmes offer the opportunity to 1) develop essential skills needed for the workplace, and 2) significantly enhance their job prospects by expanding their social networks. By participating in the daily work life of the host NGO, volunteers have an opportunity to develop work-relevant human resource and cultural capital/

The value of volunteering

"It was an honour for me to be asked to be a Groundbreaker because then I could realise my true potential of life. I finished matric in 2008 and had nothing to do, and it was like all the temptations that young people were doing out there, they could come to me. But having to be on Love Life that was making me realise there was more to live in life. You need to respect yourself, know how to take care of your body, of others, to respect others and work together. That's when I realised the value of this opportunity".

Female volunteer in Love Life's yearlong Groundbreaker programme. Interviewed August 2014.

skills that are valued by employers. These include time management, reporting, record keeping, communication, leadership, and computer skills. There is also much to be learnt about accountability, transparency, how organisations are structured and managed, or about how teams collaborate to reach a common goal.

Importantly, such programmes also expose young people to new people and ideas that expand their social networks or social capital – which is defined by the World Bank³ as "the norms and networks that enable collective action." Increasing evidence shows that social capital through networks is critical for poverty alleviation and sustainable human and economic development⁴. A leading study by

Granovetter⁵ found that expansive social networks are essential in finding a job, and that people with larger acquaintance-type ("weaker") connections stand a higher chance of getting employed because they are exposed to new information about their community more regularly than those with smaller, tighter-knit social networks. Volunteer programmes can help foster the skills within young people for constructing social "connectedness", and thus instil a habit of paying attention to the goings-on in one's community⁶. As such, by helping youth develop essential skills and improved social networks these volunteer placement programmes become a pathway to social inclusion.

Benefits to the host organisation (Institutional value): The vast majority of NGOs in South Africa are service oriented, offering focused activity for a target audience. Their broader vision may be to improve their community at large. Some programmes may, for example, attempt to narrow the ethnic cleavages in South Africa by fostering unity amongst select vulnerable groups in impoverished neighbourhoods. Youth volunteers provide such organisations with additional personnel to access vulnerable groups, and consequently help tackle the challenges of poverty and social division.

Furthermore, young people bring fresh ideas, new networks and insight, and unique skills to the organisation that can be leveraged to build the organisation's capacity and add institutional value.

Promoting tolerance and diversity

"What I've learnt? I like difference. I find myself spending time with the most random people. It has made me wanna go out into the world and make a difference, because different people can offer different things. It's exposed me to different cultures and different people and has made me open to new ideas. It has also made me question some of the things I've known my whole life".

Female volunteer in Love Life's yearlong Groundbreaker programme. Interviewed August 2014.

3 World Bank. 2011. *Overview: Social Capital*. Available online at <http://go.worldbank.org/COQTRW4QFO>. Accessed December 2014. See also Putnam, Robert D. 2000. *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

4 Ibid

5 Granovetter, Mark. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *In American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6): 1360-1380.

6 UNDP. 2010. *Human Development Report 2010. 20th Anniversary Edition*. New York.: UNDP

Benefits to broader society (Social and economic value): Youth volunteer programmes also hold huge potential for fostering social cohesion⁷ – within and between communities – by providing occasions for youth to work together for a common cause, and to feel a sense of belonging⁸. Social cohesion refers to the “glue” that binds people together in society. It is gained when people share common experiences, values and norms and is fostered through continued collective interactions. It is especially necessary to include members of society that are marginalised, like the youth, in order to maintain social cohesion. When young people participate in service and are able to reflect on their experiences, they develop a sense of responsibility for the well-being of that community, further enhancing social cohesion and adding social value⁹.

Rights and responsibilities: What organisations need to know

Before taking on a youth volunteer, organisations should review national guidelines for registered non-profit organisations, and must adhere to the Labour Relations Act and other relevant legislation that protect the rights of volunteers.

South Africa offers a favourable environment for promoting youth volunteering in NGOs. While the government has not defined the term “volunteer” in any legislation or policy, several laws and policies make reference to the rights or obligations of volunteers as well as the volunteer and charitable purposes that the government seeks to encourage¹⁰. Youth, over age 18 years are allowed to volunteer for an organisation of their choice. They should do so in a responsible and ethical manner that does not infringe on the rights of others or that of their host NGO. Conversely, host organisations maintain their right to hire volunteers and to define the terms of service, while ensuring the protection of organisational information, and the rights of the beneficiaries with whom the volunteers may be working.

Generally, volunteer placements in NGOs are not financially compensated. However, in some instances volunteers are paid a marginal stipend, or travel and phone allowance, to assist them in carrying out their volunteer duties. For those cases where volunteers are paid at least minimum wage (and no less than R2000 per month) South African legislation provides an Employment Tax Incentive¹¹ to the host organisation. This is a youth wage subsidy aimed at encouraging employers to hire young work seekers by providing a tax incentive to employers, under certain conditions.

Be equipped to host a youth volunteer

There are some practical steps that organisations can take to ensure that they are equipped to host a youth volunteer. These include:

1. **Recruit volunteers wisely.** Consider implementing a recruitment process to ensure that you take on volunteers who will fit well into your NGO environment, who are committed, and who will benefit from the experience. Consider partnerships with third party placement agents.
2. **Make sure that your volunteers are involved with real projects** so that they gain actual experience. Keep them busy – even doing little tasks like updating contact lists, or filing accounts (in order) is valuable work experience.
3. **Ensure that your organisation has the capacity and structure to host a volunteer.** Know and document what you want to achieve through the youth volunteer programme and then translate these into specific duties/tasks. Consider carefully how many volunteers you need and can cope with, and how frequently you will take on new volunteers (i.e. once a year, quarterly). Before taking on a volunteer, communicate your expectations clearly and ensure that volunteers have supervisors for all projects. From the beginning be clear about work hours, pay and the prospects of future employment at your NGO. If your organisation works with vulnerable populations ensure that your volunteers have the appropriate training and supervision to carry out their duties in an ethical and respectful manner.
4. **Start small with one volunteer at a time.** This will allow you to see if there are enough

7 Petriwskyj, A. and Warburton, J. 2007. “Redefining Volunteering for the Global Context: A Measurement Matrix for Researchers.” In *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, 12 (1): 7-13.

8 UNDP. 2010. *Human Development Report 2010., 20th Anniversary Edition.* New York:UNDP

9 Youniss, James and Miranda Yates. 1997. *Community Service and Social Responsibility in Youth.* University of Chicago press: Chicago.

10 The International Center for Not-for-profit Law (ICNL). 2011. “The Legal Framework for Volunteerism: Ten Years After International Year of Volunteers 2001.” In *Global Trends in NGO Law*, Vol. 2 (1): available online at <http://www.icnl.org/research/trends/trends2-1.html>, accessed December 2014.

11 SARS website. *Employment Tax Incentive.* Available online at <http://www.sars.gov.za/TaxTypes/PAYE/Pages/Employment-Tax-Incentive.aspx>, accessed December 2014.

- resources to manage the volunteer effectively.
5. **Inform your employees and get them all on board** to ensure they understand the purpose of the youth volunteer programme and what is expected from them in terms of it. They should also be clear on how to engage with and support the volunteer(s).
 6. **Establish a regular feedback system and monitor/mentor the volunteer.** Remember, your volunteers are inexperienced young people who are still learning. Step in quickly if there are problems and give them the chance to try again. Also, make sure that if they are dealing with vulnerable populations, sensitive subjects, or emotionally challenging issues in their work that they are appropriately briefed about the task and their safety.
 7. **Consider the future.** Youth volunteer placements are temporary and you can help the young person transition out of the organisation by doing exit interviews with them. Such interviews are designed to help the volunteer reflect on what he/she has done during the work placement experience, and discuss future prospects. Provide honest, yet supportive feedback about their strengths and weaknesses, and advise them on areas they should improve before entering the workforce full-time. Discuss job options, CVs, the need for reference letters, and if possible link them with a job-placement agency. Also give them a chance to share frankly about their experience in your NGO, which will give you important information on how to

improve your programme. Finally, offer your volunteer alumni the chance to suggest future volunteers, and to share their past experience with new recruits.

8. **Document success and measure programme outcomes.** It is essential to document the success of your volunteer programme by recording the number of volunteers progressing into fulltime employment or study after their volunteer placement has ended. Record precisely what they learn from the experience (soft and hard skills). Highlight ways to tackle the key challenges encountered. Then share this knowledge with other NGOs in your community of practice.

Conclusion

In South Africa, the issue of youth and unemployment is of special and critical importance. Young people represent a substantial and growing segment of the population, demanding that opportunities be created that will ensure their effective participation in South Africa's economy and development. NGOs offer unique spaces for young people to develop a host of practical skills. And, they are places where young people can begin to define their role in creating a just society. In a context where there is little funding for NGOs to absorb the cost of employing these young people, it makes sense that we look more closely at how NGO youth volunteer programmes may be effectively utilised to fill this gap and serve this cause.

Sara Compion has an interest in how the voluntary and non-profit sectors intersect with processes of democratisation and nation building in Southern Africa. She is currently pursuing her doctoral studies at the University of Kentucky (sara.compion@gmail.com).

The DG Murray Trust encourages its implementing partners to share their experiences and learning in the form of a Hands-on learning brief. Download guidelines on writing a Hands-on brief from <http://www.dgmt.co.za/what-we-learned/>
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