Expanding the Boundaries of Volunteer Measurement: Emergent Forms of Voluntary Action from a Transnational Perspective

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Summary

Volunteering must be measured to be recognised, but current definitions often exclude innovative forms of civic engagement. Traditional metrics focus on hours and numbers, overlooking the quality and impact of volunteering. New, informal, and hybrid forms of volunteering, blending lifestyle, activism, and community action, are often missed in national surveys, despite their public value. Sometimes it might be good to be overlooked, but it can also mean not being recognised or supported. Based upon five examples of volunteering in contexts like third spaces, crisis engagement, issue coalitions, lifestyle participation, and third-party involvement, we conclude that measuring volunteering risks excluding innovative forms that blend with daily life. Five European examples show hybrid civic actions often go unrecognised. Formal definitions limit access to resources and recognition. A broader, real-time, grassroots-based measurement approach, leveraging AI, can better capture evolving volunteer energy and its societal impact across diverse, dynamic contexts.

Keywords: Impact, Measuring, Activism, Associations, National Accounts

1. Introduction

In a world focused on data, volunteering also needs to be measured and accounted for. If something is not measured, it does not matter, and if something cannot be counted, it does not exist. Volunteering matters and it does exist! To be able to measure volunteering, it needs to be defined. The International Labour Organisation (ILO 2011: 13) defines volunteering as "Unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside their own household". To support the measurement of volunteer activities, the ILO (2011: 17) provides an interesting summary of what it regards as falling within or outside the scope of volunteering. National statistical offices are counting the number of citizens volunteering and the number of hours they 'produce', leading to international comparative rankings of countries with high and low scores (ILO 2021). However, as postulated by Cnaan et al. (1996), and as demonstrated by Handy et al. (2000), public perceptions concerning concrete activities being recognised as volunteering differ between countries. This explains why comparing volunteer rates across countries is a tricky endeavour. However, limitations of rankings are not our concern here.

Just as importantly, official definitions of volunteering have two fundamental negative consequences. First, an official definition bears a 'definition power,' which allows the government, or even civil society, to accept only certain organisational forms of volunteering or to differentiate between good (or legal) and bad (or illegal) volunteering. It gives the parties embraced by the formal definition the power to grow. At the same time, an institutionalised definition shrinks the space for people to be active in the public domain. Second, any definition hinders recognising innovation and new forms. This is fundamental for volunteering, as being a volunteer is not a static immutable condition. It is an expressive practice of individuals in perpetual mutation. It is an ongoing process, diversifying in response to circumstances into a pluriform spectrum. Clear and rigid boundaries are not the reality of volunteering. We need to understand the way people volunteer and observe what they volunteer for. This adds to the depth of the measurement. By focusing on people and hours, we measure the input of resources instead of the quality of the volunteering experience for the volunteer or the results of the volunteering for the beneficiaries, community, or society. It is more difficult to measure the process and the outcomes than the already standardised input. Furthermore, it is less precise to measure domains whose boundaries are not formally defined but are yet to be explored. But if our aim is to support volunteering, we must look beyond the already acquired knowledge.

In this article we focus on emerging forms of volunteering that are not always recognised in national surveys. These new forms share the essential aspects of civic engagement and production of public good. In this way, they address the new interpretation of the building blocks of voluntary action in its contemporary forms.

This permits us to charter the future instead of describing what has been considered volunteering in the past 25 years in Europe.

The forms of citizen activation reflected upon push the boundaries of traditional organisational forms: participation merges with lifestyle, consumption choices, other contexts, and political positioning. The focus is on the relational nature of volunteering, emphasizing the objectives that join people into previously non-existent connections. In such hybrid environments, traditional membership-based associations of people and volunteers can develop their potential to act as the backbone for widening venues for participation, by catalysing informal and direct volunteering and the weight of public and market institutions. Recognising this is an important point, as in many measuring activities traditional membership organisations are not evaluated for their dynamic potential but only for their static numbers (members, volunteers, activities). However, this quantitative basis should be enriched by understanding the qualitative aspect of direct and future impact on the lives of people involved.

1.1 Brackish waters: The mismatch between the energy of citizens and opportunities for engagement

Voluntary engagement is based upon a process of three parts: volunteer energy (supply), volunteer opportunities (demand), and volunteer activities (the match). Focusing the measurement on the match misses the ongoing, long-term trends that explain changes in volunteer energy and the volunteer opportunities of the future. The supply part is conceptualised as 'volunteer energy' (Brudney/Meijs 2009; Koolen-Maas et al. 2023), referring to the notion that some individuals will offer to volunteer when asked or given the opportunity. Volunteer energy from citizens can be measured using the concept of volunteerability: willingness, capability, and availability (Meijs et al. 2006). Traditionally, volunteer opportunities (demand) depend primarily on nonprofit organisations needing volunteers and a supporting volunteering infrastructure (including such elements as community service in secondary schools, corporate volunteering with companies, and national days of service). However, in the past two decades, changes in the collective and individual life and technological innovations have played an important role in changing the European volunteering landscape.

Creating a match is complex. Volunteerability in society is low when the opportunities to volunteer do not match what individuals can offer in terms of willingness, capability, and availability. A mismatch between volunteer energy and opportunities for volunteering will result in no actual volunteering, even despite high levels of both supply and demand. In this article, we show that the mismatch is partly a measurement issue. As we measure the shortage of volunteers in existing organisations but miss the new types of volunteers and volunteering in new organisational

forms, the esteemed mismatch may result higher than what more complete data would provide.

Regarding the concepts of volunteer energy and a supporting ecosystem (Koolen-Maas et al. 2023), the following contributions are exploring 'brackish waters,' the place where fresh and salt water meet. In this metaphor, the fresh water is what is clearly considered volunteering, in the acquired understanding of the European volunteering tradition, most typically organised through associations – non-governmental, non-profit, membership-based organisations. These have been at the core of European policy development and infrastructural support for the past forty years. In the eyes of citizens, both 'contributors' and 'spectators' of voluntary engagement, the 'service dimension' in welfare, and the 'expressive dimension' in sports and culture are easily identified as volunteering (see also Handy et al. 2000). The 'fresh water' is therefore easy to measure, because the boundaries of the definition are clear (ILO 2011; 2021) and because the scholarly, policy, and practitioners' interests and understandings coincide. By exclusion, the salt water is all that is clearly not volunteering. The ILO module operational statistical definition of voluntary work helps (ILO 2013) clarifying what volunteering is not: paid work, unpaid work within one's own household, such as grandparents taking care of children, unpaid work within a legal frame, for example internships or military service, or unpaid work that is enforced (enslaved).

The distinction between what is volunteering, our 'fresh' water, and what volunteering is not, our 'salt' water, has mostly been the terrain of institutional culture-building in the EU policy arena and oftentimes conflicted with national politics, thus contributing to measurement complications. However, as in any ecosystem, boundaries between two elements of a different nature are not clear-cut and immutable in time: they are porous, osmotic, responsive to the changes in the context.

In this article we propose a first exploration of domains that appear to be precisely that: voluntary action, yes, but possibly not fully considered volunteering yet. This might also expand the understanding of the two new volunteer energy resources Koolen-Maas et al. (2023) describe: 'Farmed Fish' and 'Marine Zooplankton'. While the fresh water is good for the traditional 'Wild Salmon', the third volunteer energy resource (Koolen-Maas et al. 2023), 'Farmed Fish' describe the sources in which a third party is providing the access to the volunteer energy while a (traditional) nonprofit guides the volunteers (Brudney/Meijs/Van Overbeeke 2019). Highly organised third-party volunteering (Haski-Leventhal/Meijs/Hustinx 2010), for example combining working for a company with volunteering (corporate volunteering) or achieving learning objectives while volunteering (service learning), is complicated for measurement, as it might lead to double counting, not reflecting how volunteering is integrated in one's life. 'Marine Zooplankton' represents the sources for spontaneous action that are difficult to measure, as they are so unorganised. 'Marine Zooplankton' represents the cases on the margins of the

ILO definition of voluntary work, which call for a wider span of volunteering practices to be included (Fonović 2024). At the same time, there are numerous instances in which people perform 'voluntary work' as defined by the ILO module interpretation of volunteering, but do not think of themselves as volunteers. They consider themselves activists, or participants, or just giving a hand in the community, or joining an initiative that feels right for a day – or do not consider themselves anything at all. However, we do. Because these novel emerging forms on the boundaries between what is considered volunteering and what is considered not-volunteering are an important reservoir of the volunteer energy for the future.

The examples we present open the challenge of measuring volunteering by considering its relational and processual dynamics and chart a first map of volunteering domains of interest for developing shared accountabilities in a multi-stakeholder approach. To this end, we first devised an observational matrix to find new practices in different European countries based upon the 'Marine Plankton' and 'Farmed Fish' metaphors. This initial scoping and categorisation exercise was undertaken by a writing team that includes young pracademics of different nationalities and different scholarly perspectives, who have been engaged with volunteering and research in different capacities. Together we have chosen five new forms of volunteering that share the following characteristics:

- They offer data from the European public sphere looking at voluntary engagement of citizens as a component of European democracy.
- They involve engaging young people with a potential open eye to the future.
- They target organisers of volunteering showing new forms of infrastructure for matching citizens to volunteering opportunities that can provide novel structures for data gathering.
- They address major global challenges but on the local level. This allows them to contribute to the global movement for recognising the contributions of volunteering to sustainable development which will be celebrated in IVY 2026.
- They focus on the relational dimension of the collective voluntary action, as measuring the quality of volunteering is measuring connections between people and goals pursued.

1.2 Boundary forms of volunteering in Europe. First results of a collective participant-observation exercise

In the ecosystem of 'brackish waters', the five examples deal with

1. alternative 'third spaces' spaces of cooperative action that open possibilities for inclusion;

2. engagement in circumstances of polycrisis and digitalisation, such as waves of refugees and natural disasters, that speaks of active citizenship;
3. issue-raising coalitions that enlarge the horizon of defending rights;
4. occasional participation as part of a lifestyle that embodies an advanced culture of citizens' contributions to sustainable development objectives;
5. third parties engaging with volunteering programmes, reflecting on how they are insufficiently considered by policy and practice, and why they are important.

In all these examples, volunteering hyphenates with other life-spheres – leisure, work, education, identity-formation, political positioning – rendering measurement more complicated. Similarly to the associative life in the membership-based tradition of European volunteering, all show that the connective tissue of these novel forms of collective voluntary action are social ties.

2. Alternative spaces of cooperative action

In this section we refer to cases of emergent, spontaneous group formation that maintain an informal organisational structure and take the form of self-managing collectives, uncoupled from any direct formal institutional or market constraints, as alternative forms of cooperative action. In this kind of contexts, volunteering is a commitment to a local community engaged in multiple practices ranging from mutual aid and social service provision to cultural expression, political mobilisation and advocacy. Three criteria differentiate these forms of voluntary action to the 'traditional' ones:

1. Collective cooperation and decision-making are based on *informality and self-organisation*
2. The scope of the collective action is based on the *local places*
3. The aims of the collective action are unified by the underlying general function of building *a sense of community*

This kind of value-based aggregation is often based on the local dimension of space and nourished by social proximity. Even when the aggregation takes place in digital spaces, it is concretised offline, thanks to neighbourhood relations.

A particularly representative case is given by Self-Managed Social Centres (SMSCs), a wide-spread practice originating in grassroots movements that occupy buildings in urban areas for the explicit purpose either of resisting its institutional/market destination (e.g. commodification, gentrification) or of urban requalification and political aggregation (Yip et al. 2018; Mudu 2014; Tupin 2013). After

successful occupation, a self-organising group forms a collective identity and brings the physical space to life by engendering opportunities for practicing political engagement, social support, cultural production, and community building. Tasks and influence in decision-making are distributed only through relational mechanisms and mediated by interpersonal dynamics of interaction. This informal dimension can be understood in terms of its functional scope, given that one of the main values of SMSCs is their attempt to counteract social disaggregation in urban spaces and the absence of the welfare state and cultural policies by informally providing public opportunities for social interaction and often forms of social support, non-formal education, and cultural expression, alongside with political mobilisation. In this sense, we can observe how alternative forms of cooperative action generally have an explicit or implicit central focus on creating third places (Oldenburg 2023) for non-market-mediated socialisation. By fostering a sense of community, these places are meant to foster dynamics of reciprocity, spontaneous support, social inclusion, local regeneration of places, and cultural effervescence.

However, while studying them, we must consider that this kind of collective action can also hide a dark side, as collectives spontaneously gathering around shared values can tend to develop closed identities driven by ideological styles, which can lead to underlying dynamics of conformity to the rhetorics that circulate hierarchically within them. Sometimes this intrinsic dynamic of political self-organisation can result in forms of radicalisation and non-reflexivity in group political thinking. Furthermore, for the same reason, it can be difficult for a new volunteer or for new entries with non-conformed political perspectives to become and keep being included.

In this type of community space, volunteering overlaps with activism and militancy. Such blended reality is challenging for measurement. While it is easy to label as a volunteer an individual providing a free after-school programme to support children and families in the neighbourhood, it is not so straightforward to draw a line that distinguishes volunteering from political participation, for example in the case of individuals participating in an assembly to organise a political protest. Analytical distinctions for measurement purposes ought to be handled carefully and bear in mind the overlap and hybridity between the categories of volunteering and political activism occurring in these particular contexts of civic activation.

3. Commitment to global challenges: Practices as political positioning

The world today is faced with multiple global crises ranging from concrete and potential pandemics to climate change and the war in Ukraine, with one crisis seemingly triggering or worsening another, intensifying the impact and harm associated with these crises. The intersectionality of crises led to the popularisation of the concept of polycrisis, which as per Allouche et al. (2023) refers to a state where

multiple crises intertwine, their causes and processes inseparably coming together to create heightened effects. War, for instance, does not only lead to the destruction of infrastructure but also to mass displacement; and in cases of pandemics and climate change, the human populace is affected in terms of inadequate productivity. All these crises impact livelihoods, thereby creating a gap in humanitarian needs, and volunteering has played a critical role in responding to the crises and supporting affected populations.

Globalisation and progress in technology have created interconnectedness and interdependence of the world, wherein peripheral crises interact and reinforce each other (Katsikas et al. 2025). In the same vein, improvements in technology have presented opportunities to explore potential mechanisms to support people affected by crises even beyond borders. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia triggered forced migration, and millions of people who fled Ukraine left for Poland – with some moving to other EU countries shortly after entering Poland (Podgórska et al. 2024). In Poland, as in other European countries, widespread humanitarian actions were implemented by volunteers, indicating a positive impact of volunteering in supporting refugees.

Citizens in their diversity offered their presence, time, and other resources to support others who were affected by the consequences of crises. Utilising digital platforms, teams were formed, collaborations were established, and crowdfunding campaigns were launched (Sithole 2024). These efforts culminated in offline delivery of humanitarian needs such as food, housing, and transport. Besides voluntary actions aimed at supporting refugees from Ukraine with humanitarian needs, we posit that the pro-Palestinian student protests that spread across Europe (Corder et al. 2024) are yet another practice bordering on volunteering. This confirms that there is a rise in new forms of volunteering that are individualized, periodic, and at times online (Hustinx/Meijs 2011).

In a polycrisis world, volunteering has proven to be a valuable and impactful practice for volunteers themselves, the people supported by them, and other stakeholders. Volunteering has seen strangers fostering new relationships and strengthening them, bound by an interest in delivering aid to affected populations and standing in solidarity with victims of calamities elsewhere. Transcending self-organisation in online communities, practical activities were implemented offline and online to alleviate the consequences created by a crisis.

Citizens across Europe identified needs and voluntarily responded accordingly to the Ukrainian refugees. Some opened their homes to host them, drivers provided transport from the border to different destinations, and many delivered warm meals and drinks at train stations. Apart from the value in fostering local and

transnational networks, volunteering presented a sense of satisfaction amongst volunteers as they felt that their contributions were for the greater good.

In times of crisis, states and other stakeholders in the humanitarian ecosystem are often unprepared. Hence, the presence of volunteers goes a long way in closing the gaps and facilitating integration. The significant contributions of volunteering are worthy of acknowledgement, as they inform policy and practice for better preparedness of stakeholders in future.

4. Issue-raising coalitions: Filling public space with values

Public norms and regulations often do not sufficiently recognise the role of coalitions raised around socially crucial issues. Nevertheless, they are one of the most potent people-raising initiatives. We can consider them as reflecting what traditional membership-based volunteering did to stimulate the recognition of social and human rights and the agenda it set for civil society to function.

The coalitions raising issues speak to the European values, but also to the ones that are controversial or contested in some countries. For example, a movement can be congruent with the European values of tolerance, equity, and inclusion, and yet, in some countries, it can be considered controversial, as not everybody accepts the postulates put forward by the coalition members. Moreover, they can also be formed around issues that contest the general direction of the current policies and highlight the importance of traditional rules. However, regardless of the moral compasses which are fundamental to the particular coalitions, they are a form of freely expressing oneself using democratic rights to protest. Thus, they are instances of democracy at its best.

Issue-raising coalitions put to forefront how volunteering engages and stimulates the general public. They have a great educational potential towards citizens and public policy decision makers; they are an alternative modality of practice-politics. Many agenda-setting or awareness activities are small in time (e.g. based on episodic volunteering during protests) but may be still big in creating a community or a larger movement.

Examples of coalitions raising socially important issues in Europe are the Pride movement (Bruce 2016), initiatives for human rights (Park et al. 2019), pro-choice and pro-life movements regarding abortion issues (Cullen/Korolczuk 2019), support for the excluded (e.g. people in homelessness crisis, people with disabilities, people in poverty) in communities (Ilcan/Lacey 2007), and global citizenship support movements (Reysen/Hackett 2017). Many of them are controversial.

Participation in such initiatives can have an impact on the engaged individuals, for example:

- Building identities and well-being through advocacy. Thanks to participation in issue-raising coalitions, people can build and express their identities, share personal stories, enhance their well-being and lead a more fulfilling life (Literte 2020; Reid et al. 2019; Rychlik 2021). For instance, people gathered in the Pride movements might find a way to safely come out, put forward their needs, and build a positive identity, while seeing that they are not alone.
- Forming social networks and fulfilling the need to belong. Issue-raising coalitions provide an opportunity to be part of a social network, which can be useful in building further professional or private relationships, fulfilling the needs of relatedness and belonging (Orhan/Craig 2025).
- Empowerment and creating a sense of agency. By participating in an issue-raising coalition, people can feel empowered while fighting for certain rights (Aceros et al. 2021), and, while seeing a positive change on a higher level, develop a sense of agency and be encouraged to actively use their rights to demonstrate and advocate for legislative changes. This can lead to greater engagement of future volunteers and encourage the feeling that one person can have a real impact on what happens around them.
- Radicalisation. Apart from the positive influence on people being part of a coalition, negative aspects can be observed, too (Opozda-Suder et al. 2024), for example radicalisation and deterioration of personal relationships with people who do not support a particular matter. This can encourage remaining in an information bubble and hinder the chances for overcoming biases and barriers in communication with others. This aspect does not necessarily discourage volunteering. It would be interesting to study how these individual-level consequences relate to wider societal impacts.

5. Occasional participation as part of a lifestyle: Culture, sports, community, environment

Traditionally, the ideal volunteer in Europe was extracted from a pre-existing network constructed for a particular cause. More recently, however, a typical volunteer arises from a looser network, where 'members' miscellaneously connect when it best suits their own, personal lifestyle. Untethered to membership in a long-established association, more volunteering opportunities are presented to people connected by casual communities both on- and offline. These networks alter between different temporal and spatial arrangements, as they vary in degree of centralization and fluctuate in frequency of meeting. Nevertheless, these loose networks can quickly mobilise great numbers of people, often because the net is cast so widely.

In the realm of large-scale public cultural events, there is a heavy reliance on these loose networks of enthusiastic individuals who might spontaneously decide to

contribute voluntarily. For instance, the vibrant festival culture spans from small town gatherings to internationally acclaimed music festivals. Not only are these events cultural highlights, but they are also deeply rooted in local traditions and social life. Behind the scenes, a diverse group of volunteers power these events. Ranging from residents of nearby towns who see the festival as a community affair to passionate festivalgoers who travel from afar to be part of the experience. Together they are connected by shared interests and occasional collaboration. Such weak ties are crucial: they allow for the flexibility needed to sustain the once-a-year cultural events year after year by drawing on a broad and ever-evolving pool of support, volunteer energy, and potential volunteers.

In the same vein, volunteering in Europe nowadays often means that an opportunity aligns with the individual's lifestyle and their sense of community, perhaps more so than helping the public good. Increasingly so, the line is becoming thinner between volunteering and leisure activity, as well as a sense of belonging and participation. An example are initiatives like Let's Do It, where European citizens are invited to register to local litter clean-up-campaigns in order to get support from the EU. In doing so, the EU connects multiple smaller communities to a larger, loose network that ideally entices more individuals to volunteer and contribute to the cause. By uniting the smaller campaigns into one formal one, there is a greater pool of potential volunteers to consult. Shaped by large networks of peers, communities, and shared values, individuals find themselves making meaningful choices that extend beyond formal work and civic duties. In all Europe, ethics as well as community and leisure become heavily intertwined with volunteering.

6. Third parties: Emerging actors for volunteer matching

We use the example of the Czech Republic to trigger a critical assessment of how institutions, different from associations and non-profit organisations, are considered in different European countries with regard to their potential for magnetising, channelling, and amplifying volunteer energy. In Czechia, the four main sectors (government, local administration, businesses, universities) considered to hold the key for the prosperity and progressivity of the volunteer ecosystem have all the resources to endorse new forms of volunteering, but they suffer from networking deficiency and struggle with maximising potential impact.

In terms of policy, volunteering in Czechia falls within the competence of the Crime prevention department of the Ministry of the Interior and has a legally regulated "volunteer service". There is an ambitious Volunteer Development Policy 2030 that strategically operates only within the ILO definition of volunteering, leaving topics like active citizenship, future youth volunteering, and borderline activities out of scope. The policy reflects the 'active' side of Czech cultural identity, but the lack of a vision for the future of volunteering as a whole reflects more of the 'idle' side.

There is a hidden potential in the local administrations, as municipalities and regional organisational networks play an important role in the Czech volunteer ecosystem. They are not only the biggest sources of volunteer engagement, but their scope of activity, being not strictly bound by the ILO or government definition, often tends to cross the formal boundaries of volunteer efforts. Of course, it varies greatly across regions, but some general categories related to borderline volunteering forms can be identified:

- regional one-time low-threshold activities (cleanups, charity events);
- participative decision making and public education (Agenda 21, Active Citizens Fund);
- traditional associations responding to an aging population (fire brigades, Scouts).

In the private, for-profit sector, the concept of Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) accountability is becoming more of a standard for bigger Czech companies. The experience of NGOs being asked to *find for their employees something to do on a specific day* can be measured as additional volunteer hours in the society, but in fact the impact is dubious. Still, the ESG strategies are generally more impactful than local administrations programs. The potential for impact measurement of the corporate ESG-generated volunteer opportunities could be enormous in terms of capital diffusion where companies redirect resources to borderline and hybrid volunteer activities: NGO event support, professional skills sharing or in-house employee rights, and well-being advocacy.

On a more positive note, there is a significant rise in establishing volunteer centres, communities, and activities amongst Czech universities. This fully reflects the universities' third mission and at the same time satisfies the urge of young students to 'make a difference' and develop transversal skills. Apparently, it is the perfect environment for emerging new border-line volunteering forms. In 2023 a couple of universities joined forces and published a methodology for implementing various forms of volunteer opportunities and incentives.

In conclusion, in Czechia the productive and borderline progressive part is emerging as dominant in local administrations and businesses. The universities seem to act on their potential as a trendsetter in this area. Metaphorically speaking, this volunteer ship is moving in the right direction in brackish waters, loaded with strong praxis and progressive ideas. However, the motion towards a broader and more open-minded approach related to new forms of volunteering seems to be slow.

What about the government's role in this challenge? The Ministry holds a huge stimulating potential, though the extension to boundary forms of volunteering does not reside in its current agenda. If we aim for a diverse approach to volunteering

and its measurement, we need to step out of the dichotomies. Supporting not only the traditional but also progressive decentralised stakeholders (municipalities, companies, universities) could be done through professional mediating and networking focused on evidence-based impact measurement of all the possible kinds of volunteer effort. If the government proved able to lead this process, then we can shift from ambivalent active rigid citizenship to proper citizenship – and be able to measure it.

7. Conclusion

Measuring the quantity of volunteering is important but bears two major risks. As measuring, and consequential comparison, need a stable formal definition that remains fixed over time, measurement can pose obstacles when considering change and innovation. In this article, five explorations of practices in Europe present widespread and easily recognisable examples of citizens' activation not counted as volunteering, which thrive at the hyphenated spaces between volunteering and other life-spheres such as leisure, work, education, identity-formation, and political positioning. These forms of volunteering are the materialisation of the volunteer energy resources 'Farmed Fish' and 'Marine Zooplankton' as described by Koolen-Maas et al. (2023). They seem to prosper in brackish water where many stakeholders find it difficult to address the participants as volunteers but do acknowledge that they are volunteering. Certainly, in these hybrid spaces the 'volunteer work market' is undergoing evolutions comparable to the paid labour market where, for example, many people are paid for their work or gig-job but are often not considered employees.

The relation between volunteering and (not) being recognised as a volunteer is important as it entails legal consequences, potentially both positive and negative. It might be good in some contexts to not recognise the volunteering as being done by volunteers, while in others this might take away advantages, for example the right to get expenses compensated. Indeed, the definition power, the second consequence of a formal definition, is also a problem, as inclusion or exclusion of entities or activities from the normative sphere of what is considered volunteering translates into the possibility of access to resources. Policy can regulate funding, insurance, support by volunteering centers, partnership opportunities with public administration, and a voice in decision-making. But recognition is also a form of symbolic capital, it magnetises trust of the general public.

The task we see for the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) and its members is to promote real-time, all-encompassing measurement initiatives on community, programme and organisational level in a transnational European perspective. The data gathering should move from central bureaus of statistics and voluntary support centres to (non-)traditional voluntary organisations and their networks on

the grass-roots level. In envisaging this direction, we propose putting to use the emerging potential of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning tools in the framework of the EU register of recognised data altruism organisations that has been established in the framework of the Data Governance Act (DGA), a key pillar of the European strategy for data.

This could provide channels to incorporate in the measurement efforts the voice of people who are actually producing the common good. We need to observe, as they make their everyday decisions, for which goals they want to invest their individual reservoirs of volunteer energy. The ways in which this match between the time, talents, and priorities of individuals is weaved together in small collectives, not necessarily communities, will provide us with pointers on both policy and practice.

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