

Theoretical foundations and practical applications of e-volunteering within the European Solidarity Corps during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in Poland

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ABSTRACT

This work discusses the theoretical foundations of e-volunteering as well as its practical applications, based on the European Solidarity Corps research findings, carried out in 2020 among foreign volunteers who came to Poland for a one year volunteering project.

Keywords: e-volunteering, online volunteering, international volunteering, European Solidarity Corps, social service, solidarity, Covid-19

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF E-VOLUNTEERING

E-volunteering is a non-compulsory, unpaid Internet-mediated activity for the benefit of other person or people coming from outside of one's family or friends' circle [1]. It is also referred to as online volunteering, virtual volunteering or cyber volunteering and encompasses all volunteering activities where volunteer or volunteers perform their tasks online. E-volunteers typically perform the following activities:

- translation, editing and proofreading;
- research activities;
- creation and update of websites;

- journalism and media monitoring;
- educational content creation;
- graphics creation;
- coaching, teaching, advisory services [2].

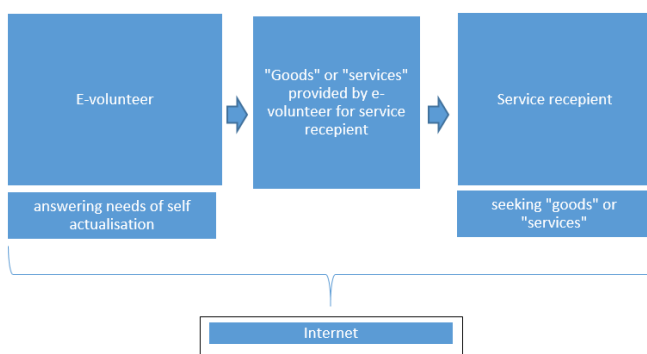
E-volunteers can provide their services directly or can use online platforms in order to connect with those who need or seek such service.

In order to understand e-volunteers' motivation and the interdependencies between them, the recipients of their services and the Internet as the space for voluntary work, the proposed theoretical model is grounded in the following theories:

- Actor-network theory (M. Callon, B. Latour, J. Law) stipulating the existence of human and non-human actors and their equal treatment [3]. In the context of e-volunteering, and pursuant the definitions proposed by Actor-network theory, human actors are e-volunteers and the recipients of their services, whereas non-human actors are "objects, artefacts or structures that interact in a network with people by constraining, permitting, facilitating, promoting or responding to human actions" [4] – in this context non-human actors are online platforms connecting e-volunteers and recipients of their services and the Internet itself;

- Hierarchy of needs theory (A. Maslov) arguing that once physiological, safety and belonging needs are fulfilled, people seek esteem and self-actualisation understood as “achieving full potential as humans” [5]. In this context, e-volunteers can be understood as those, who – by helping others (and thus, answering their more basic needs) – fulfil their own needs of self-actualisation. At the same time, e-volunteers’ service recipients seek to satisfy their own, more basic needs;
- Social exchange theory (G. Homans) analysing the social behaviour in the interactions of two actors with a cost-benefit perspective: one actor is in possession of “goods” that are of value to the other actor [6]. In this perspective, e-volunteering (but also regular volunteering) can be seen as exchange of “goods” or “services” that one actor (e-volunteer) is capable of doing for the benefit of the other actor (service recipient) who seeks this particular “goods” or “services”.

The proposed theoretical model, based on the three above-mentioned theories, can take the form of the following scheme:



¹ European Union Programme which aims at promoting solidarity as a value, mainly through volunteering, to enhance the engagement of young people (aged 18-30)

2. CONTEXT AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The above-mentioned theoretical framework was used to understand and explain the change in the design of international volunteering projects implemented by foreign volunteers in Poland, within European Solidarity Corps¹, between March and May 2020 – during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in Europe.

The study involved 95 foreign volunteers who could neither leave Poland and come back to their home countries (or had difficulties leaving), nor carry out the activities they came to Poland for, because of government restrictions in public gatherings, traveling and social distancing measures imposed from March to May 2020. The key research questions included:

- how did the European Solidarity Corps volunteering projects hosted in Poland change in the period of March-May 2020 as a result of the lockdown?
- what were volunteers' tasks during the lockdown? What tasks were stopped because of the lockdown? Were there any new activities in which the volunteers engaged as a result of the lockdown [8]?

3. KEY FINDINGS

For almost 50% of respondents the leading motivation to stay in Poland and to carry on with their project was the willingness to continue to support the local community, still, according to 62% of respondents the project activities have been modified a lot comparing with the time before the lockdown –

and organisations in accessible and high quality solidarity activities as a means to strengthening cohesion, solidarity, democracy and citizenship in Europe [7].

many activities carried out in person were stopped and were moved online (for example providing foreign language classes for Polish students, providing intercultural workshops for local communities, office work for the hosting organisation) [9]. This shift to e-volunteering activities fits the theoretical model described earlier: volunteers continued to fulfil the needs of the local community. These needs changed as a result of Covid-19 pandemic, and so did the means to fulfil them. Personal contact was therefore replaced with Internet-mediated one.

Among the new activities the respondents named the following: online shopping for the elderly members of local communities who were advised to stay home, foreign language classes for young people who were about to take their final exams or coaching and psychological support online (provided by those e-volunteers with background in psychology)[9].

4. CONCLUSIONS

Covid-19 pandemic had a major influence on long-term volunteering projects within European Solidarity Corps hosted in Poland. The adopted theoretical model helped to understand the mechanism behind foreign volunteers' motivations and actions during Covid 19 pandemic in Poland. From regular volunteers, over the course of several weeks they became e-volunteers, changed their everyday routines in order to fulfil their own needs as well as the ones of the local communities, to serve them best during lockdown.

5. REFERENCES

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