

'This word volunteer is killing us': Making sense of volunteering in social welfare provision for orphans and vulnerable children in rural Zimbabwe

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Cathrine Madziva

London Metropolitan University, UK

Martha Chinouya

University of Liverpool, UK

Abstract

This qualitative study explored how volunteers delivering social welfare to orphans and vulnerable children through a community initiative supported by donors made sense of volunteering during a period of hyperinflation in Zimbabwe. Findings confirm that volunteering in Africa is influenced by a normative value system embedded in *Ubuntu*. Volunteering emerged as contradictory given the contextual prevalence of the social obligation discourse rather than individual choice as embedded in the European sense of voluntarism. Volunteering masked the cost of participation, thereby potentially making poverty worse for the poor in a context without a formal welfare system.

Keywords

Community response, normative value system, orphans and vulnerable children, stipend tokens, traditional cultural capital, *Ubuntu*, volunteering

Introduction

To address the grave impact of HIV/AIDS on children, the United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) issued the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS in June 2001. The Declaration included Articles 65, 66 and 67 which identified specific targets and strategies. Article 66 requires national governments to implement national policies which would strengthen family and community capacity to support children, while Article 67 calls on the international community to complement national efforts. Zimbabwe was one of the first signatory countries to develop a

Corresponding author:

Cathrine Madziva, London Metropolitan University, Tower Building, 166–220 Holloway Road, Holloway, London N7 8DB, UK.

Email: c.madziva@londonmet.ac.uk

National Orphan Care Policy, which was subsequently superseded in 2003 by the National Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children. Both iterations of the Zimbabwean policy treat community responses as part of the solution. Within this UNGASS terrain, North–South development partnerships accorded volunteering a key position for providing care through community responses to vulnerable children. Against this backdrop, volunteering became the method of participation conceptualised by northern stakeholders as empowering local communities. This conception signalled that rewards for local volunteers in the South would be non-monetary.

Background

Volunteering has a long history. By the late 19th century, most Christian missionary organisations had established the channelling of regular donations from parishioners to missions in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Intertwined goals included the spreading of Christianity and the provision of education and western medical services (Ahmed and Potter, 2006). In Europe, during World War II, volunteers cared for the wounded and collected supplies, inter alia. This coincided with a significant rise of the non-profit sector in the North in response to humanitarian needs. The end of World War II brought in a shift from humanitarian to development work in the global South (Development Initiatives, 2009). The 1980s witnessed further growth of the non-profit sector in development. This sector operated to fill gaps, as southern governments scaled back from state-financed service provision in line with policy advice of the Bretton Woods institutions. This coincided with increased aid from northern donor governments (Desai, 1996). In Zimbabwe, state ineffectiveness as the HIV/AIDs pandemic unravelled contributed to resource scarcity for service provision (Prowse and Bird, 2007). This resulted in communities having to rely more heavily on volunteer caregivers.

Despite growing reliance and international discourse on the role of volunteers in contributing to social development, Graham et al. (2012) note that academic work across Africa on the subject of volunteering remains scant. Few studies in the region focus on volunteer motivation in supporting those affected by HIV/AIDS (Akintola, 2011; Campbell et al., 2009; Rödlach, 2010), stipend payment (Hunter and Ross, 2013) and perceptions of rewards for volunteering (Akintola, 2010). Commentators acknowledge that volunteering in Africa is underpinned by a normative value system (Everatt et al., 2005; Foster, 2004; Greif et al., 2011; Rödlach, 2010; Russell and Wilkinson-Maposa, 2011), which relates to norms and values which guide people's behaviour. This value system is deeply embedded in the principles of *Ubuntu* (Ndebele)/*Hunhu* (Shona), as it is known in the two main languages spoken in Zimbabwe. As will be further explained in the ensuing sections, *Ubuntu* relates to a way of being, a code of conduct within most African societies which is concerned with the development and nurturing of mutual relationships (Nussbaum, 2003).

However, very little is known about how volunteers in rural Zimbabwe caring for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) make sense of their volunteering in a context lacking a formal welfare system for the poor. Against this backdrop, this article aims to contribute to widening our knowledge base regarding understanding volunteers' perceptions and experiences of volunteering in relation to OVC service provision.

Theoretical framework

Volunteering as a social construct with multifaceted fluid meanings defies easy definition (Hustinx et al., 2010). As Wilson (2000) notes, one problem is that the generic term 'volunteering' encompasses a variety of distinct activities. Nevertheless, the notion takes its root from the concept of voluntary action based on the choice of the actor, in contrast with action or activity which is

organised through coercion. Volunteering is associated with three constellations focusing on unpaid work, 'serious' leisure or activism (Rochester, 2006). This research study on volunteers' experiences takes the dominant constellation of unpaid work as its starting point. This fits with the nature of volunteering in this study which involves provision of unpaid labour by giving up time to help others, in an organisational setting (Smith, 1996). Smith (1998, cited in Paine et al., 2010: 9) defines volunteering as 'any activity which involves spending time, unpaid work, doing something which aims to benefit someone (individuals or groups) other than or in addition to close relatives, or to benefit the environment'. The study by Cnaan et al. (1996) views what constitutes volunteering as accruing a net cost for participants minus benefits derived. The more net cost accrued by the individual, the more likely they are to be considered a volunteer (Handy et al., 2000; Meijjs et al., 2003). Hence, three key dimensions can be identified: unpaid work, beneficiaries and accruing a net cost. The analysis by Cnaan et al. (1996) adds two more dimensions: the notion of free choice and structure, either formal or informal. This article considers the definition by Cnaan et al. (1996) with a special focus on the notion of free choice and accrued net costs. While this definition covers a variety of volunteering experiences, it is problematic because the notion that the option to help one's neighbours is a matter of free choice is questionable in Africa (Russell and Wilkson-Maposa, 2011). What counts as free choice elsewhere is here underpinned by obligatory normative practices (Everatt et al., 2005; Graham et al., 2012) guided by *Ubuntu* principles. The question arises as to whether volunteering as a free choice is an oxymoron for rural Africans and what this might imply regarding policy on the part of northern stakeholders for building in appropriate material support for such 'volunteers'.

The study setting

This study was conducted between 2006 and 2011. Fieldwork began at a time when Zimbabwe was experiencing hyperinflation of over 30,000,000 percent (Tupy, 2008), the highest in the 21st century. For the last 20 years, many families have had to depend on remittances from abroad due to lack of employment prospects with over 2 million recently in need of food aid. With a population of 13 million, Zimbabwe is a landlocked country whose people mainly practise Christianity along with indigenous beliefs. When Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, it made major strides in social services and health provision. The onset of structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s instigated a reversal to some of these gains (MacDonald, 2000). As the HIV/AIDS crisis worsened, poor governance, an ill-conceived land reform programme and irrational monetary policies (Prowse and Bird, 2007) led to dismal state failure to ensure citizen access to basic services (Barungi and Davies, 2010). This included services for children. After a heavily disputed election, a coalition government comprising the ruling party Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) came into force in 2009. This halted hyperinflation as the Zimbabwean dollar was abandoned in favour of foreign currencies, mainly the South African rand and US dollar. ZANU PF soon returned to the helm, having won a majority in the 2013 elections. Presiding over a worsening economic crisis where poverty, food shortages and unemployment are endemic, the ruling party is fraught with leadership-succession infighting (*The Economist*, 2015). While there have been improvements in Zimbabwe's life expectancy due to a decline in HIV/AIDS prevalence rates and improved access to HIV medicines, life remains generally challenging with over 80 percent unemployment and individual poverty at 72 percent (African Development Bank, 2013).

This study was conducted within a community-based organisation (CBO) X which operates in Buhera South District (BSD). Buhera District has a population of approximately 250,000 mainly surviving on subsistence farming, and poverty is pervasive (Parliament of Zimbabwe, 2011).

Dominated by a harsh drought-prone terrain and poor road networks, travelling in this region is difficult. The CBO was initiated in 1995 by community members in response to OVC needs. At the time of the study there were over 8000 OVC in the district. With 144 community volunteers, supported by eight salaried staff, the CBO aimed to improve the quality of children's lives through the provision of food, clothing, payment of school fees and counselling. Volunteers were responsible for home visits, assessing children's needs, distributing food and clothing, liaising with school heads regarding school fees and counselling. Over the past few decades, international donor funding to Zimbabwe has been in decline due to donor distrust of the ZANU PF government (Meldrum, 2008), thereby increasing reliance on volunteers. The programme operated through participatory structures which involved a wide range of stakeholders from the community, including traditional leadership, volunteers and local government departments. At the time of fieldwork, the project was funded by four international donors, including an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) whose staff were interviewed in this study.

Methods

This article draws on a qualitative study partly conducted in rural Zimbabwe. The study was part of a larger research project which aimed at understanding community responses to OVC supported by INGOs through development partnerships. Qualitative research was used as this enabled us to explore the nature of local people cooperating and mobilising to problem solve. As Creswell (1998) notes, qualitative research is suitable for accessing participants' beliefs, values and attitudes when there are complex and contradictory tensions informing decision-making processes. Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants as this allowed data to be collected from those with knowledge and experience of volunteering and those who support them (Ritchie et al., 2004). Informed and written consent were obtained from all participants and confidentiality was ensured. All participants were coded using numbers and alphabetic letters so as to protect their rights to confidentiality. A total of six individual in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held, each comprising six volunteers, to explore their experiences of volunteering and 'frameworks of understanding' (Carter and Henderson, 2007: 222). Individual in-depth interviews with six CBO X and two INGO Y staff were held at their offices, while those with volunteers were held at two separate training events. The study received approval from the London Metropolitan University Research Ethics Committee. Data were digitally recorded and transferred as audio files to a computer. Interviews with staff were held in English and the rest were in Shona. Data were translated to English and transcribed. A thematic framework was utilised for data analysis. The process involved classifying and organising data by key themes, concepts and emerging categories (Ritchie et al., 2004).

The sample

A total of 22 participants took part in the study, and they included 14 volunteers, 2 staff from INGO Y, the supporting INGO, and 6 CBO X staff. Table 1 shows participant characteristics and data collection methods.

Results

This section presents the results of the study based on the following emerging themes: (a) motivations underpinning volunteering, (b) meaning of volunteering and (c) volunteering as a way of masking things.

Table 1. Respondents and data collection methods.

| Respondents | Data collection methods |
|---|--|
| Volunteers 8 females and 6 males Age range: 35–60 years Education: primary and/or secondary school | Focus group discussions and individual in-depth interviews |
| CBO X paid staff 3 females and 3 males Age range: 32–55 years Education: degree level | Individual in-depth interviews |
| INGO Y staff 2 males Age range: 35–55 years Education: degree/postgraduate level | Individual in-depth interviews |

Motivations underpinning volunteering: Religion, reciprocity, respect and social obligation

Volunteers play a critical role in supporting OVC in Zimbabwe, and in Buhera in particular. Participants were asked to explain what motivates them to be volunteers, and it emerged that ownership of the OVC problem was a key motivator. This is how one participant responded:

The problem is ours, the community, us the parents, the caregivers in this area, we are the one with the problem orphanhood is now in every family. (Volunteer F)

Respondents asserted that every family had lost someone, an adult relative or friend who was a parent, thereby transferring the responsibility of caring for children to the adult survivors who were now the volunteers. Participants also perceived they were all affected by orphanhood, making it a shared experience, as noted during a focus group discussion:

People here are now united because they see it as a problem [OVC] that we all share, we tend to say it's our problem, let's put our heads together because everyone is dying. (Volunteer 1, FGD L)

While the above quotes clearly expressed OVC problem ownership, and putting 'heads together' implied joint thinking, a shift in perception appeared to have taken place as reflected in the usage of the word 'now'. This shift may relate to children once considered to belong to the extended family now being seen as the responsibility of the wider community, as instigated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the strong presence of Christian faith, which is consistent with commitment to collectivist traditional values:

Worshipping God helps us, when you read the bible, it talks of looking after one another; it says you must help another person without expecting a reward, the reward comes from God. (Volunteer K)

Christianity therefore plays a big role in volunteering as it encourages showing love and compassion with God giving the ultimate reward in the afterlife or strength to overcome difficulties such as those faced in caring for children amid limited financial resources. Others, through their faith, felt bequeathed with gifts of love and compassion, thereby answering a call which could not be refused:

You have a desire to see the children, the work calls for you and you answer to the call. (Volunteer 2, FGD M)

The idea of a call resonates with Christian beliefs of God calling men and women in the Bible to serve him through dedication to a particular cause. However, this was not just a personal call but involved the whole community, as further explained:

You need to be very committed, from the very beginning others in the community had to see that this one has a good heart let's chose this one, so I thought ok if I have been chosen to do this voluntary work I must do it. But I soon realized that it demands a good heart and long suffering. (Volunteer 4, FGD L)

This introduces an important phenomenon in volunteering in this rural setting, that is, volunteers are chosen by other community members, which does not chime with Eurocentric notions of free choice. This is indicative of the presence of a social obligation contract guided by normative values embedded in *Ubuntu*. Participants noted that not everyone was born to be a volunteer as one needed special qualities such as the gift to love. One participant put it this way:

A person can be born with a gift of love and compassion. So I say it's just being born with a gift of love and compassion that is different from what the other person has. (Volunteer 3, FGD M)

Furthermore, the issue of reciprocity in the event of one's own death was partly credited with getting the community to come together for collective action:

You may wake up one day dead and your children are now orphans and so these things [voluntarism] cover us all, with this disease [HIV/AIDS] among us; tomorrow it may be you. (Volunteer 2, FGD M)

Given the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, no one was perceived immune; hence, volunteers considered their services towards OVC as acts which could be reciprocated for their children in the event that they too should succumb to the disease. However, being a volunteer did not often guarantee support of one's family in the event of death, as one noted,

I don't know how this story will fit in with the story under discussion but as we are now, we just walk and walk [gravity of the work and distances to cover] if I die today working with CBO X, if I die, I wish they would remember me, to say, there is our member who was working with orphans, I don't know how this is perceived because right now, they don't remember us ... there is one [volunteer] we buried without any support. (Volunteer 4, FGD L)

While what is expressed here may appear odd to outsiders, in sub-Saharan African communities value funeral support as burial is considered one of the most important rites in one's life. However, CBO X's international supporters did not recognise this, as reflected in the case of one volunteer who died and was buried without any support from the organisation. Volunteers were unhappy about this. Staff, however, felt that volunteering partly gave volunteers some 'respect' and power in the community as noted,

The responsibility [of being a volunteer], motivates them as well because they are leaders, people listen to them when they talk, they have respect, once they put on their uniforms, and shoes, they are obeyed, at a rural setting that is all very motivating. (Staff G, CBO X)

The idea of commanding respect resonates with volunteers as expressed by a male participant:

If we have a meeting we call people and they gather, we won't have anything to give them but just our words, they clap hands to say thank you, things will improve as more help comes. (Volunteer 3, FGD M)

While staff alluded to uniforms, shoes and bicycles as motivators, the majority of volunteers interviewed indicated that they did not have these, except for ward chairpersons. Furthermore, during fieldwork, some volunteers had walked more than 17 km barefoot to attend a training event where some of the interviews were held.

The meaning of volunteering

Participants were asked to explain their understanding of the word 'volunteer', and it was noted that this pertains to someone who worked for free. Most crucially, this was associated with western contexts and undertaken as part of 'charity things' by those who have 'everything', in contrast to those who have nothing 'to hold':

Someone who works for free and does not get anything in return, like people in Britain, they have everything so they do charity things, but as you can see us here we have nothing to hold [material things], look at those mothers there [pointing at women volunteers], some of them don't even have shoes. (Volunteer 1, FGD L)

The notion of having everything does not necessarily translate to wealth, but to access to basic needs. This is in sharp contrast to people who do not own a pair of shoes and are considered among the poorest. Staff also highlighted the contradictions as global North volunteers are paid out-of-pocket expenses, and yet this was not entirely the case for southern volunteers:

Volunteers are people who work for free, no payment given. But from my understanding of the West, they are not left out of pocket [they are given] lunch money, bus fare, but here it's different, our partners [donors] say there is no money for volunteers. They don't seem to understand that these people have nothing, but they do most of the work. (Staff A, CBO X)

To another volunteer participant, the label wronged them immensely:

A volunteer, it's a person who just does the work without being given anything; that term of calling us volunteers wronged us immensely. (Volunteer 3, FGD L)

In addition, participants were eager to highlight that volunteering was challenging. A staff member put it this way:

[Volunteers] do a lot of work, they facilitate, making sure the children get the food and they identify the orphans, they go into the community, they identify child headed households; they actually come up with the lists. (Staff I, CBO X)

It's their [volunteers'] commitment which counts, how would it work without them? (Staff G, CBO X)

Apart from the demanding nature of the work, the harsh socio-economic climate prevailing in the country makes volunteering extremely challenging:

Voluntarism in Zimbabwe is very difficult, you don't have food at your home and you are taking care of someone's children in another village and so on, you are walking, it's hot, you leave your family, you lose the opportunity of sustaining your family, your children. (Staff C, INGO Y)

While commitment was evident, the opportunity cost borne by their families meant volunteering potentially left them materially worse off.

'Volunteering' as a way of masking issues

Volunteers were asked about their perceptions and experiences of volunteering, and it emerged that the work was extremely demanding, as explained next:

The work we do in this community is hard; you have to attend many meetings, visit the children, it's hard, for instance I have a wife, she says sometimes, 'you are just going there leaving the fields untouched to do this voluntary work of yours'. (Volunteer 3, FGD L)

As noted above, volunteers believed that in attending to the children's needs they often neglected their own homes. Given the comments expressed above, it seemed that caregivers were not happy with the label 'volunteer'. The above case regarding a male volunteer whose wife expressed disenchantment about him going to do 'voluntary' while leaving the fields 'untouched' aptly captures this. In such cases, the lack of payment for the volunteer was seen as problematic as they were poor people who could not meet the needs of their own families:

If it were possible, we do wish that in the future we could get a small token, not a pay, but a small token that which you can just be given to you to help yourself as a person who is also helping. The problem that we have with this our voluntary work is that we do it as people who also don't have much. (Volunteer 4, FGD M)

Most importantly, volunteers reported that they were not specifically asking for monetary payment but rather, where possible, food tokens that could help them in their household, as one noted:

If we could only get a little, even 2kg [of sugar], if we could get because when you make porridge for the child you also take a mouthful. (Volunteer R)

Others pointed at the difficulties experienced and put it this way:

What can I say about this story of ours? This story of volunteering, it's painful, if we could get something because those who herd cattle they also drink the milk of the cows, but they [CBO X international partners] forget us there. (Volunteer 2, FGD M)

International partners who collaborated with the local organisations were problematised as not recognising the needs of volunteers, particularly in the case of Zimbabwe where, if people rely on subsistence farming in a drought-prone region, it can be difficult to access commodities such as sugar. Notions of taking a mouthful of porridge and drinking cow's milk are strong proverbial echoes reinforcing the idea of a token stipend as opposed to payment. Participants lamented the use of the volunteer label. It masked their poverty and deprived them of any potential support:

This word volunteer is killing us because we are also people in need; we are people with nothing to hold. (Volunteer R)

Caregivers perceived themselves as people who had 'nothing to hold', an expression which denotes material poverty, and being a volunteer compounded their poverty and others expressed it this way:

The word voluntary is covering up things! (Volunteer 4, FGD L)

While participants suggested that the concept ‘voluntary’ was somehow a smokescreen, they were in agreement with the CBO constitution which stipulated that salaries were only for office staff. Crucially, they referred to this constitution as ‘our’, which denoted a sense of ownership – a familiar thread among volunteers:

We can’t talk about that because our [CBO’Xs] constitution says the salaries are for the office workers. (Volunteer 3, FGD M)

In addition, volunteering also appeared to create tensions within the family unit:

When you return home [from OVC-related work] you can take home a bar of soap so they [wife and children] can say, father had gone away but at least he brought home a bar of soap, then you won’t have to return from the workshop and start wanting to borrow money to buy a bar of soap. This is when others get discouraged because those at home will say these your things [of volunteering] are not very good because you are still borrowing soap from us, so this story doesn’t stand right at all. (Volunteer 3, FGD L)

For rural families, basic necessities such as soap, sugar, salt and cooking oil are key to their survival; hence, borrowing such basics from neighbours after being busy with volunteering activities attracts mockery. However, it emerged that volunteers were in receipt of a token stipend, but hyperinflation prevailing at the time made it negligible, as one volunteer explained:

They were giving us \$300 [US\$0.08] every quarter, but then they decided that this money would be useless to give us that much so they decided to give us in one go for the whole year and it comes up to \$1500 [US\$0.40] they said at least you can buy a loaf of bread, \$300 doesn’t buy anything. (Volunteer 1, FGD M)

Understandably, hyperinflation and a challenging socio-economic political climate made it extremely difficult for donors to plan ahead during this time. However, 40 cents a year raised questions about their understanding of the nature of volunteering and those who volunteer. The case of Mrs T, a key founding member and volunteer for almost 10 years, generally highlights the plight of volunteers. At 57 she was a widow with seven children, three of whom had dropped out of school just before the programme was initiated due to lack of school fees. She had a small garden where she grew vegetables, her only source of income. Her family was getting by on one meal a day. Against this background, it is vital to question the fairness of using the poor as volunteers without decent token stipends in the context of the absence of a formal social welfare system.

Discussion

Motivation for volunteering

In the light of the diminished role of the nation state in direct service provision, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and resource constraints to cater for HIV/AIDS-affected communities, findings from this study and elsewhere in Africa (Germann et al., 2009; US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief [PEPFAR], 2012; Thurman et al., 2007; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS [UNAIDS], 2006) show that volunteers remain the anchor of community responses supported by donors. This gives credence to the global discourse on the role of volunteers in contributing to social development.

Findings suggest that volunteer motivation in this Zimbabwean context is spurred by a sense of problem ownership informed by a normative value system embedded in *Ubuntu*. Despite the

heterogeneity of African culture across the continent, a number of scholars concur that *Ubuntu* drives most aspects of societal life in African societies (Nussbaum, 2003; Sibanda, 2014; Tambulasi and Kayuni, 2005). While Broodryk (2006) identifies *Ubuntu* as existing in most African languages, for example Zulu, Xhosa, Sesetho, Swahili, Chichiwa and Yoruba, spoken in sub-Saharan Africa, *Ubuntu* literature in relation to North African Arab countries not considered part of sub-Saharan Africa is scarce. Nussbaum (2003: 2) defines *Ubuntu* as ‘... capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining a community with justice and mutual caring’. This resonates with Christianity, which emphasises uprightness, sharing, forgiveness and loving one’s neighbours (Chinouya, 2007). Against this backdrop, a person with *Ubuntu* is ‘one who upholds the African cultural standards, expectations, values and norms ...’ (Sibanda, 2014: 26). At the heart of those values and norms is the core belief that *unmntu ngumuntu ngabanye*, that is, a person is a person through others (Chinouya, 2007), which alludes to connectedness and communal responsibilities. This indicates interdependence as no one can exist alone or is self-sufficient. Findings from this study show that reciprocity, solidarity and respect are at the heart of such connectedness and communal responsibilities. Reciprocity is a prominent characteristic of people living together in African traditional rural societies whereby community members often support each other through contributing to field labour and food in times of serious need such as funerals (Foster, 2002b). Based on a system of solidarity, this ensures individuals will receive the same assistance should they face adversity themselves (Everatt et al., 2005; Foster, 2004; Greif et al., 2011; Rödlach, 2010; Russell and Wilkinson-Maposa, 2011). Such arrangements can be termed traditional cultural capital and as such are context dependent. While literature on the subject tends to allude to African societies in general, as previously noted, little, if anything, is known about the existence of analogues to *Ubuntu* in North African Arab countries. This raises questions regarding generalising this normative value system across the African continent in relation to volunteering. Religion which strongly resonates with *Ubuntu* principles emerged as a key motivator for volunteering in this study and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (Akintola, 2010, 2011; Foster, 2002b; Germann et al., 2009; Phiri et al., 2000; TearFund, 2004). Under Christianity, the predominant religion in Zimbabwe, believers are challenged to follow the leadership of Christ in identifying with the poor, sick and needy (The Holy Bible, n.d.: James 1:27). Some volunteers felt motivated by inwardly bestowed gifts of love and compassion which aligns with the idea of ‘having a caring heart’ (Foster, 2002b: 18) alongside commandeering respect from the community. While staff identified uniforms as motivators for volunteering, this was questionable as the majority of volunteers gathered at two separate training events were observed without such uniforms. Indeed, volunteers expressed desire for uniforms during the research, for visibility in the community, alongside shoes and bicycles for home visits.

Volunteering as a way of masking things: Conceptual challenges, social obligation, poverty and non-payment

The notion of ‘volunteering’ emerged as problematic, in light of the connotations of free choice (Cnaan et al., 1996) and unencumbered autonomy which it bears in common parlance, which may itself be embedded in a specific but unstated parochial cultural ensemble. ‘Volunteering’ masked the lack of free choice due to the presence of a social obligation contract which resonates with literature on volunteering across sub-Saharan Africa (Russell and Wilkson-Maposa, 2011). The specific cultural ensemble which prevails in this context finds ‘volunteering’ embedded in *Ubuntu* where collectively structured obligations and promptings by other community members significantly constrain and shape individual action. This highlights interconnectedness of self and

community, a key aspect of *Ubuntu* rather than individualism (Nussbaum, 2003). These findings confirm previous findings that voluntary activities in sub-Saharan Africa are underpinned by a sense of obligation where social norms feed into people's behaviour (Everatt et al., 2005; Graham et al., 2012). However, the other volunteering dimensions by Cnaan et al. (1996) resonated with the experience of volunteers in this study with regard to remuneration (negligible) and structure, that is, a formal organisational setting with OVC as beneficiaries. There was an awareness among participants that the original source of the volunteering discourse typically refers to relatively economically privileged people in the global North who can afford to do work without payment. This was in sharp contrast to volunteers in this study who are counted among the poorest. On the back of hyperinflation, the attempted token, then tantamount to a loaf of bread a year, proved negligible. In the light of this, some felt labelling them volunteers wronged them immensely because their circumstances did not fit into their perception of those who supposedly volunteer.

Noteworthy is that the word 'volunteer' does not exist in many African languages, and most specifically in Zimbabwean languages, hence its usage in its original Anglo-Saxon form which makes it difficult to appreciate locally. However, the selection of volunteers by other community members in OVC welfare service provision as people of high moral standards across sub-Saharan Africa resonates with the literature (Manyeli, 2007; UNAIDS, 2006). In this context, those who exhibit appropriate moral standards are considered to have *Ubuntu*. Their way of life shows that they recognise that they are persons because of others. They recognise that they cannot be self-sufficient; for example, they strive to show compassion to others because they know that they too require compassion, hence the notion of reciprocity. Those who are individualistic lack *Ubuntu* and are perceived to be unworthy of selection. Thus, bound by a religious, social obligation and cultural construct, embedded in *Ubuntu*, volunteers in this study felt that the concept was misplaced as it represented the other, that is, those well off in the global North. Far from being private, volunteering was a public and dispersed affair, accompanied by what outsiders may consider insignificant trade-offs, that is, recognition and respect from the wider community.

Findings from this study and elsewhere (Campbell et al., 2009; CARE, 2004; Hunter and Ross, 2013; Rödlach, 2010; UNAIDS, 2006) indicate that volunteers involved in rural community initiatives are often people in dire poverty. This is particularly the case in sub-Saharan Africa, as rural areas are often marginalised with very few employment opportunities. However, it appears that ground realities in such contexts are barely understood by policy makers and donors. While there was evidence of decent token stipend provision to volunteers in a similar initiative in Kenya supported by Pathfinder International (Thurman et al., 2007), at the time this was an exception. Volunteers in this study evidenced resilience, which is commendable; but as Collins and Rau (2000) argue, this should not be used as 'an excuse for doing little or nothing to reduce pressures on communities' (p. 40). Moreover, higher levels of participation by community members in OVC welfare services and other development agendas have long been seen as a panacea for fostering ownership required for sustainability (Esman and Uphoff, 1984). However, findings indicate that volunteering masked the real cost of participation as volunteers lost valuable time to sustain their families. This confirms the argument that 'at the most basic level, it – participation, may involve real or imputed financial losses due to the time commitments required for adequate participation' (Mansuri and Rao, 2000: 11). This being the case, it can be argued that such programmes, despite the benefits, potentially make the poor pay more than the wealthy (Ribot, 1995). While far from forced labour, it can be argued that participation can be a smokescreen (Brinkerhoff, 2002) which hides the covert exploitation of the poor through well-intentioned policy responses. Conceptually, if one is judged to be more of a volunteer based on accruing more net cost (Cnaan et al., 1996), this is problematic because in this context this translates to losing time to sustain

one's family. While volunteering in this context fits in the unpaid work constellation, clearly this leaves volunteers worse off.

Volunteers in this study walked long distances for home visits to children due to a sparsely populated harsh terrain. This questions the notion that CBOs cut costs due to proximity to the beneficiary in welfare-related programmes (Foster, 2002a; Opare, 2007). In the event of death, volunteers lamented the lack of support from the programme. Research studies (Drew et al., 1996; Nyambedha et al., 2003; Steinberg et al., 2002) have shown that in sub-Saharan Africa, death is considered one of the most important rites of life governed by the normative value system underpinning volunteering. Hence, the failure of programmes to make contributions to the funeral of a volunteer who has dedicated years to OVC social welfare is considered inappropriate. Formal employers in sub-Saharan Africa are known to make token contributions towards employee funerals as a gesture of solidarity.

Conclusion

This article aimed to contribute to widening the knowledge base regarding our understanding of volunteering in Zimbabwe. It sought to unravel how volunteers in an OVC community welfare programme supported by donors make sense of volunteering. The study confirms that volunteering in sub-Saharan Africa is underpinned by a normative value system embedded in *Ubuntu* which constitutes valuable cultural capital. However, research is required to explore whether an analogue to *Ubuntu* exists in North African Arab countries and, if so, whether it influences volunteering in a comparable manner. The study showed how the concept of volunteering is contradictory due to the contextual prevalence of the social obligation discourse rather than individual choice which is embedded in the European sense of volunteering. Research is required to explore the applicability of the concept elsewhere in Africa. Furthermore, labelling caregivers as volunteers masked the costly nature of their participation. Hence, despite well-meaning global policies regarding harnessing volunteer contributions to social development programmes, we contend that such programmes can, in some cases, make poverty even worse for the poor. Thus, global policy makers focusing on the role of volunteers in such programmes, particularly in rural sub-Saharan Africa, should note that in most cases it is some of the poorest people who support the most vulnerable without a formal welfare system. In the light of this, we recommend factoring decent token stipends for volunteers at programme planning stages to alleviate participation costs. This, however, requires striking a balance with preserving self-reliance in communities, hence the Congolese proverb 'when you call for rain, remember to protect the banana trees' (Foster, 2005: 19). In this analogy, banana trees are the cultural capital which underpins sustainable community coping mechanisms. Research is required to explore how such a balance can be struck and sustained. While CBOs generally operate at low costs due to proximity, contextual variations must be considered as in some instances reaching recipients may be a challenge due to long distances requiring to be covered. Bicycles can ease this and strengthen volunteer motivation while keeping costs relatively low. In conclusion, we also suggest that supporting volunteer funerals with token contributions in the spirit of solidarity and reciprocity against a background of the need to take cognisance of local value systems would go some way in strengthening volunteer motivation. Those who look after the OVC generation deserve to be heard, for despite their poverty they continue to toil. The inclusion of their voices in academic debates is a worthy starting point.

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Author biographies

Cathrine Madziva (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in Public Health at London Metropolitan University in the Faculty of Social Sciences. She has a special interest in vulnerable children's welfare in the context of development partnerships.

Martha Chinouya (PhD) is a Lecturer in Public Health at University of Liverpool, London Campus. Previously she has had professional input in social work teaching and research at various global institutions.