

Volunteering: how to assess the value of volunteering in sport?

General issues

Voluntary work is one of the human activities that have an undeniable aura. Indeed, we can only admire all those who put themselves at the service of others without asking for remuneration in return. Volunteering would thus be the bearer of values that are too often forgotten in a productivist world: mutual aid, solidarity, cooperation and altruism. In addition, from a social and cultural point of view, volunteering is a source of economic and social cohesion: inclusion, social bonding, well-being and citizenship. Nevertheless, from a strictly economic point of view, volunteering, by definition, belongs to the category of externalities, which will lead to a certain number of difficulties and controversies regarding its measurement.

Sport is particularly concerned by this issue of evaluation. Indeed, without volunteers, the French system of sports organisation would be in great danger. Let us recall that in France sport is still considered a public good with a strong commitment from the public authorities for its regulation and financing. Faced with the current relative disengagement of the State, the sporting movement fears an increased recourse to market mechanisms through public service delegations and privatisations. The consequence could be a risk of dualisation between the commercial sector and the federal sector, between solvent and insolvent participants, between the professional and the amateur world, and between efficient urban areas and rural or urban depressed areas. It is to be feared that the market will not be able to respond to all the demands of disadvantaged publics or territories, all the things that the sporting movement was able to do thanks to public support and voluntary work. It is in such a context that the question of the evaluation of the weight and value of volunteer sport arises.

The sporting movement wants the services rendered by all its volunteers to be recognised in their rightful place for two essential reasons:

- Volunteering creates economic value thanks to all the externalities linked to the practice of sport: health, education, social integration, diversity, etc.
- Volunteering saves society a great deal of money compared to situations where payments would have to be made to service providers.

Such an assessment of the weight and value of volunteer sport is, however, fraught with problems given the gaps in the information available.

Physical assessment of volunteering: the specificities of sport

The weight of volunteering can be measured in three different ways: the number of volunteers, the number of volunteer participations or the number of hours of volunteer work. According to the latest CRA-CSA 2017 survey [Prouteau, 2018], the number of volunteers is estimated at 22 million, i.e., a volunteer rate in France of 43%, and the number of volunteer participation is estimated at 33 million, as the same volunteer can make several participations. It is important to note that this volunteer work is highly concentrated, with only 15% of volunteers doing more than 80% of the work.

However, all these estimates should be taken with a pinch of salt, as they are based on the quality of the surveys carried out either amongst volunteers or the structures hosting volunteers. There are therefore significant differences in the assessment of the weight of volunteering since a Ministry of Education survey detected 13 million participants in 2017 [Bastien, 2019].

Ranked by field of activity, it is the defence of rights, causes and interests that come out on top (23% of participation), followed by social, charitable and humanitarian activities (20%), then sport and leisure activities (17% each), with culture representing 12% participation. Beyond this relative weight of sport volunteering, it is interesting to note the specificities in the profile of sport volunteers compared to other sectors:

- It offers more regular participation than occasional participation, unlike the leisure sector for example.
- It is characterised by the longest participation period (over 10 years).
- There are twice as many males as female volunteers (which is the largest disparity compared with other sectors).
- It is younger than in all other sectors.
- Their participation is not related to their level of education.

The second way of estimating the weight of volunteering is to evaluate the number of hours that volunteers have devoted to it, which can then be transcribed into the number of FTE jobs (full-time equivalent). According to the CRA-CSA survey, the overall volume of volunteering in 2017 was between 1,320,000 and 1,460,000 FTE jobs, mainly in associations. Sport would account for about 20% of this, with social and charitable action coming in first place with 25%. If on average, a volunteer spends 68 hours a year on active participation, sports volunteers spend 81 hours, in second place behind social activities (95 hours) but far ahead of leisure activities (48 hours) and culture (60 hours).

As with the determination of the number of volunteers, these figures should be treated with restraint. However, they relate to elements that are relatively simple to evaluate: number of volunteers and number of hours of participation. This makes it difficult to assess the monetary value of volunteers.

Monetary evaluation of volunteering: the ambiguities

The monetary evaluation of voluntary work poses many methodological problems for the economist. We find the same difficulties as those encountered, for example, in the evaluation of domestic work, which has given rise to numerous disputes between experts. There are two methods of evaluation, either at market prices or cost factors:

- The evaluation at market prices consists in determining for a service rendered by the 'housewife' or 'homemaker' (ironing, cooking, etc.) how much it would have cost if it had been done through the market (dry cleaning, restaurant, etc.).
- Factor costing involves choosing the rate at which the homemaker would have been paid if a salaried worker had performed their task.

The latter is the most common method used to estimate the monetary value of volunteering. It is called the replacement cost method. It calculates how much the service would have cost the volunteer's host organisation if it had been provided by a paid worker. This method is based on more or less reliable assumptions:

- It is not certain that the employee and the volunteer have the same productivity. Therefore, there may be cases of over or under-estimation of the replacement cost.
- It is always difficult to choose a reference salary: minimum wage? The average salary of the sector of activity concerned?
- Should the salary be differentiated according to the nature of the task performed by the volunteer?

All these choices are not neutral and they allow us to understand the great variability in the estimates of the monetary value of volunteering. There are two examples of rare attempts made in France to evaluate volunteerism in sport [Bastien, 2019]:

- Kurt Salmon published a study in 2014 on behalf of the French National Olympic and Sports Committee (CNOSF). Based on an estimate of the number of jobs FTE jobs that volunteering would represent (i.e. 300,000), the firm used two reference salaries. By using the minimum wage, the value of volunteering amounts to 7.5 billion euros, when including the average wage in sports associations, it amounts to 11 billion euros.

- The Centre de droit et d'économie du sport (CDES), at the request of the CNOSF in 2018, proposed another evaluation also based on an estimate of the number of FTE jobs (i.e. 274,000) and using two reference salaries: either the 2018 SMIC, which results in an evaluation of the voluntary work of 5.2 billion euros or the average salary of the sporting sector in 2018, which gives an amount of 10.1 billion euros.

Other scenarios are available and they always show a wide range of estimates depending on the assumptions made. This has led some economists to question the finality of such a calculation: what is the point of using a monetary indicator to evaluate volunteering with its replacement cost by a salaried worker? Wouldn't it be better to think about the value of the service provided by the volunteer?

The need for further research on volunteering

From an economic standpoint, volunteering is still one of the phenomena that deserve more attention at a time when societal upheavals are in preparation in the face of the risks of the collapse of the thermo-industrial civilisation. Indeed, we urgently need to reimagine the world now before reaching irreversible thresholds with global warming or the biodiversity crisis. In this perspective, volunteering and the values it brings are to be promoted in order to re-think the 'good life' together. Indeed, it is a question of promoting new values to replace the struggle of all against all, the permanent economic war, by cooperation, mutual aid, conviviality and solidarity, of which volunteering is a good example.

Here we find the proponents of the current thought of convivialism. Let us recall that the first Manifesto (Declaration of Interdependence, 2013) drew a new doctrine of social organisation around four principles: the principle of common humanity which must be respected for everyone, regardless of race, nationality or gender; the principle of common sociality according to which true wealth resides in the relationships between people; the principle of individuation which allows each person to develop his or her capabilities; the principle of controlled opposition which authorises conflict while ensuring that it does not drift into destructive violence. In the second Manifesto (For a Post-Neoliberal World, 2020), a fifth principle of "common naturalness" and the meta-principle of hubris control was added. Humanity's survival could only be achieved by respecting nature and living by limiting our desires. All these principles should, in theory, guarantee a good life together. The question is to know, in practice, how to make this construction desirable for the greatest number of people, but also to show how it is possible.

Volunteering fits perfectly into this search for a societal alternative, particularly because it is representative of a symbol that could

be at the centre of the social organisation of the future: gratuity [Ariès, 2011]. This would call into question money, wealth, growth and progress, which have been and still are sacred in our productivist societies of competition and performance. On the other hand, a gratuity would allow us to re-engage with an ideal of family relationships, associations, neighbourhoods and the sharing of common goods. In short, gratuity frees us from the imperialism of the economy and the market. This means that it reveals a value that is not that of the price born of market exchange. This is a classic debate about value in economics and the distinction between value and price. The market value of volunteering is not necessarily what should be measured from a societal alternative perspective. On the other hand, it would be much more interesting to try to understand the value of the services rendered by volunteers in terms of health, education, citizenship, integration, social ties, etc., in fact, everything that constitutes the social utility of sport.

Further information:

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