Unlocking Potential – International Conference 2011

Surfing the Silver Wave – Ensuring Civic Engagement and Wellbeing in an Ageing Society

Dr Virpi Timonen
School of Social Work and Social Policy
Trinity College Dublin

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Purpose

- ‘give an overview of the demographic and social trends, challenges and opportunities offered by an ageing population from an all Ireland, European and International perspective’
- ‘touch on some of the research that has explored impact of volunteering on health and wellbeing’
Outline

- Quick glance at those demographic projections we have all seen about 100 times…
- Why we must take social productivity, including volunteering, seriously
- Why more people must be enabled and motivated to volunteer
The Demographic Transition

(McCarthy 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Technology</th>
<th>Preindustrial</th>
<th>Early Industrial</th>
<th>Mature Industrial</th>
<th>Postindustrial</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population Growth</td>
<td>Very Slow</td>
<td>Rapid</td>
<td>Slowing</td>
<td>Very Slow</td>
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![Diagram showing the Demographic Transition]
Life expectancy at birth – average for both sexes

(OECD 2008)
Average life expectancy at 65 in the OECD

(OECD 2008)
Age structure, millions of people by age bracket in Europe, N America, Japan, NZ & Australia
Rhetoric emphasises:

- ‘active’, ‘positive’, ‘productive’, ‘successful’ ageing (Rowe & Kahn 1997)
- Good health, active engagement with work & social participation
- (re-)engaging older people in the economic (labour market) sphere (when it suits the needs of the economy!)
Emphasising these notions tends to lead to:

→ ignoring / underestimating older people’s role in the ‘informal’ spheres of family and community, where their work is unaccounted for in economic terms and usually remains hidden and unrecognized
All types of activities generating goods and services that are *socially and economically valued by recipients*:

- Paid work
- Volunteering
- Help for family, friends, neighbours
- Caring for a sick / disabled person
Social Productivity

- Extent of engagement in social productivity?

- Who volunteers and why?

- Is volunteering associated with wellbeing? (Self-assessed health, depressive symptoms, quality of life)

- If yes, to what extent is the association modified by the QUALITY of engagement (defined as experienced reciprocity / non-reciprocity)?
Social Productivity in Europe
Siegrist & Wahrendorf

- 10 % in voluntary work (more prevalent among men)
- 17 % informal help (more prevalent among women)
- 5 % informal care work (more prevalent among women)

North-South gradient in volunteering
Association between engagement & well-being
Older volunteers in Europe (Hank and Erlinghagen 2010)

- Societal context has a significant impact on prevalence of volunteering & on dynamics of volunteering
- Volunteering transitions affected by individual resources and changes in these

Both the individual life course AND context matter
Factors that affect volunteering (Choi 2003)

**Environmental Factors**
- Region
- Urbanicity

**Social Roles**
- Work
- Marital Status

**Resources**
- Health Status

**Social-Structural Factors**
- Age
- Gender
- Race
- Education
- Income
- Occupation
- Religious Preference
- Depression Scale

**Life Style**
- Formal Organization Participation

**Volunteer Work**
And what does volunteering ‘do’ to volunteers?

- Several studies have shown positive associations with wellbeing, life satisfaction, mental health, self-reported physical health (e.g. Wisconsin Longitudinal Study)
Hot off the press...

Information on volunteering in the Republic of Ireland from the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA)

- Survey data collected in 2009 - 2010
- Report forthcoming May 2011
Volunteering in RoI – TILDa first results for 2010

Note. N = 5995; Missing obs = 267; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals.
Findings from ELSA

Volunteering post-retirement by age

(Nazroo 2010)
Intimate social relationships
Formal activity outside work
Active and social leisure
Passive and solitary leisure

Male
Female

Primary/none
Secondary
Third/higher

Note. N = 6168; Missing obs = 94; Error bars correspond to 95% confidence intervals
Again compare TILDA with ELSA and note the similarity of pattern...  

(Nazroo 2010)

Volunteering post-retirement age by wealth
Volunteering and Quality of Life

Volunteering DOES improve quality of life – but this effect disappears when we control for (take into account) the effect of wealth. BUT when the volunteer feels rewarded, their quality of life improves regardless of other factors!

(McMunn et al. 2009)
This does not have to be complicated!

‘What we do is twice a year we bring all the drivers out for a meal… Just to say thank you. We usually go just after Christmas and around about July, we bring them all out for a meal and you have a night out and they appreciate it… we couldn’t operate without them. They’re worth that and more.’

(Meals-on-wheels co-ordinator in O’Dwyer and Timonen 2009)
It’s a win-win situation but...

- Volunteering at older ages is a win-win situation: everyone benefits
- BUT: benefits of volunteering flow currently disproportionately to those who are advantaged in other ways
- Involvement in some voluntary activities declining and seriously under threat
Quality and opportunities

Need for more opportunities for engagement in socially productive activities

QUALITY of such activities must be high enough to motivate and encourage participation

→ tailored to capabilities and motivations of (older) people
To Conclude: To-Do List:

- Do not take volunteering for granted!
- Increase the rewards older volunteers derive from their involvement and efforts
- Improve the quality of volunteering opportunities (feedback opportunities, good management)
- Raise awareness of and combat inequalities in access to volunteering