

Economic analysis of volunteers' motivations—A cross-country study

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Received 23 June 2003; accepted 21 November 2005

Abstract

While some core theories on volunteer labor supply decisions can be found in the economic literature, little efforts were made so far to operationalize these models and verify their implications in an empirical context. This paper aims at narrowing the research gap between the theoretical economic literature on volunteer motivations and the empirically observed motivations for volunteer labor supply. A common indicator 'voluntary contributions by others' linking the theories of public goods, private consumption and investment has been identified and examined on the basis of structural equation modeling and regression analysis. Using representative micro data collected for volunteers in Bangladesh, Ghana, Poland and South Korea, the paper finds that this indicator significantly influences an individual's motivation. Particularly, observed findings are in accordance with theoretical predictions.

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JEL classification: A13; C51; C52; J22; J24; L31

Keywords: Volunteer work; Volunteer's motivation; Altruism; Nonprofit

1. Introduction

The institution of volunteerism represents an insufficiently explored research area. Given the potentials ascribed to volunteerism from the sides of academics, policy makers and practitioners, such as its capacity to support public social welfare functions, build social capital, or mitigate unemployment problems (see e.g. Badelt, 1985; Romero, 2000; Gaskin and Davis Smith, 1996; Robinson and White, 1997), the question regarding what induces individuals to volunteer has not

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been adequately addressed in the economic literature. While motives underlying volunteer contributions can be identified in theory, little is known about these motivations and their determinants in an empirical context.

The path to overcome this missing link between economic theories and empirical evidence is two-fold. On one hand, theories on volunteer labor supply need to be operationalized to allow for an empirical verification of model implications. On the other hand, the latent construct ‘volunteer motivation’ has to be captured and the classification of volunteers into the theoretically proposed motivational groups needs to be verified. This paper is a first attempt to fill this lacuna.

In a first part we establish that theoretical implications on volunteer behavior differ according to the underlying motivational framework used. The theories propose that, depending on the motive for volunteering, volunteers will react quite differently to changes in the level of voluntary contributions by others. The degree to which the models imply substitutability between own donations and donations by others can therefore be regarded as an indicator on the basis of which the models can be distinguished empirically.

To capture volunteer motives empirically, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is employed. Micro-level data on volunteers, collected through organizational level surveys in Bangladesh, Ghana, Poland and South Korea in July–November 2001 provide the basis for this analysis.

Using the obtained motivation measures for volunteers in regression analysis, it then becomes possible to investigate the extent to which volunteer motives are indeed affected by the level of contributions by others and if variations in motives are compatible with model implications. The inclusion of socio-demographic, institutional and country effects as explanatory variables controls for other influences on volunteer motives.

Section 2 introduces three fundamental economic theories of volunteer labor supply and deduces model implications. Section 3 defines the operationalization of the concept ‘motivation’ and establishes the conceptual framework. Section 4 presents the regression results and Section 5 concludes.

2. Economic theories of volunteer motives

Economic theorists have generally acknowledged three microeconomic models to explain volunteer labor supply (see e.g. Andreoni, 1990; Freeman, 1996; Menchik and Weisbrod, 1987). The difference between the models lies in the assumption regarding what motivates volunteers to give and what is of value to the volunteer, see Table 1.

Even though other relevant economic benefits which motivate volunteers to give also exist, it is assumed that these three outlined benefits are representative of a wide spectrum of volunteer

Table 1
Models explaining volunteering

Model	Benefit	General motivation
Public goods	Altruistic benefit	To increase the supply of the public good
Private consumption	Self-value benefit	Joy from the act of volunteering, ‘warm-glow’ utility
Investment	Exchange benefit	To gain labor market experience, skills, and contacts

Source: Roy and Ziemek (2000).

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