



Philipine van Overbeeke

De waarde van vrijwilligers heroverwogen

Onderzoeker Van Overbeeke pleit
voor bredere kijk op rol en waarde
vrijwilligers



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Vrijwilligers Interview

Dit is het eerste interview in een reeks waarin onderzoekers relevante inzichten voor de filantropische praktijk delen. Philine van Overbeeke onderzoekt de rol en waarde van vrijwilligers en pleit voor een bredere kijk op hun maatschappelijke, strategische en verbindende waarde.

What is the main focus of your research, and why does it matter for philanthropic organizations?

‘My research focuses on volunteer management, volunteer value creation, and the role of volunteers in nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. I am especially interested in how volunteers create value beyond simply saving money or replacing paid staff. This matters because volunteers are often central to the mission, governance, community reach, and legitimacy of many nonprofit organizations and foundations.’

‘If organizations understand volunteers only as “free labour”, they risk missing the broader social, relational, and strategic value volunteers bring. My work argues for a more value-based approach to involving volunteers, where organizations stop asking only “How many volunteers do we need?” and move towards “What kinds of value can volunteers uniquely create, and under what conditions?”.’

‘These questions are also relevant for endowed foundations, corporate foundations, and corporations that support volunteer-based organisations or invest in employee volunteering initiatives. Understanding volunteer value can help them think more critically about what kinds of volunteering they want to encourage and what outcomes they hope volunteering will achieve.’

What originally drew you to this field of research?

‘I was drawn to this field through an interest in the nonprofit sector and the question of how organizations create social value. During my studies in business administration and global business and sustainability at Rotterdam School of Management, I became particularly interested in volunteers through work on the value of volunteers for UNICEF the Netherlands.’

‘What fascinated me was that everyone says volunteers are valuable, but we often struggle to explain exactly how and for whom. That gap between what practitioners know intuitively and what organizations actually measure became a central motivation for my research. I wanted to better understand volunteers as actors who shape what foundations and nonprofit organizations can achieve, rather than just as an add-on to organizations.’

How can academic research help philanthropic organizations navigate today's social challenges?

‘Volunteer managers, charity leaders, funders, corporate foundations, and policymakers are making decisions every day about how volunteering is organized, valued, and supported. Academic research can help inform those decisions, but only if it is translated into language and formats that practitioners can actually use. I also see dissemination as a two-way process: practitioners can challenge academic assumptions and help identify the questions that really matter in the sector. For me, bridging research and practice is central to doing meaningful research in this field.’

What is one common misconception about volunteering or volunteer management that your research challenges?

‘A common misconception is that the main value of volunteers is that they reduce costs. Of course, volunteers contribute time and labour, and that can have financial implications. My research shows that volunteers also create value through their perspectives, networks, credibility, commitment, lived experience, and connection to communities. This is especially important in debates about whether volunteers substitute paid staff, or whether organizations are becoming more “volunteerized” rather than professionalized.’

‘I think that debate is often too simplified: Substitution can be a real concern, but it does not have to be. The key question is whether (or why) volunteers are being used to replace professional capacity, or whether they are being involved in ways that complement staff and create forms of value that paid roles alone could not generate.’

From your research perspective, what societal value can volunteering create within philanthropic organizations?

‘Volunteering can create societal value by strengthening participation, inclusion, trust, and connection between organizations and communities. In philanthropic organizations, volunteers can act as bridges: they connect causes to local realities, bring in community knowledge, and make organizations more responsive and legitimate. Volunteering can also create value for volunteers themselves, by offering opportunities for learning, belonging, civic engagement, and meaningful contribution.’

What are you currently researching that could become particularly relevant for the philanthropic sector in the coming years?

‘I am currently looking at changing trends in volunteering and what these mean for philanthropic organizations. A central part of my current research focuses on third-party volunteering, including corporate volunteering, volunteer tourism, and other forms of volunteering organized through employers, schools, universities, travel organizations, or intermediary platforms. This is highly relevant for companies and corporate foundations, because employee volunteering is often seen as a way to connect corporate resources with social impact. But these arrangements raise important questions: Who defines the value of the volunteering? Who benefits? Whose needs are prioritized? And how can organizations avoid designing volunteering primarily around the volunteer experience rather than community benefit?’

‘I am also interested in volunteer inclusion, especially how younger people and other groups access volunteering opportunities. Many people contribute through informal help, mutual aid, short-term projects, skills-based volunteering, crisis response, or third-party arrangements, but they may not describe these activities as “volunteering”. What we count shapes what we value and support. In the coming years, philanthropic organizations will need to adapt to more flexible, diverse, and sometimes less traditional forms of participation, while still asking hard questions about quality, inclusion, and impact.’

What is one assumption or practice in philanthropy that needs rethinking?

‘One assumption that needs rethinking is that more volunteering is always better. For philanthropic organizations and corporate foundations, the more important question is: better for whom, and under what conditions? Corporate volunteering, for example, can create real value when it is grounded in nonprofit needs, long-term relationships, and appropriate skills. But it can also create burdens for host organizations if it is short-term, poorly aligned, or designed mainly for corporate engagement goals. For example, a company may organize a one-day volunteering activity that provides a positive employee experience but creates significant coordination costs for the nonprofit host organization.’

‘A second practice that needs rethinking is measuring volunteering mainly in numbers: hours contributed, people mobilized, or monetary value assigned to unpaid labor. Those indicators can be useful, but they do not tell us whether volunteering is inclusive, meaningful, ethically organized, or genuinely valuable to communities. I think philanthropy needs to move towards a more reflective approach: one that asks how volunteers complement paid staff, how they are supported, whose participation is enabled, and what kinds of social value are actually being created. That shift is especially important as corporate and third-party forms of volunteering continue to grow.’

Philine van Overbeeke is Research Fellow aan het Gradel Institute of Charity, New College, University of Oxford. Haar onderzoek richt zich op vrijwilligersmanagement en de maatschappelijke waarde van vrijwilligers binnen non-profit- en filantropische organisaties. Zij combineert academisch onderzoek met kennisdeling richting de praktijk via onder meer masterclasses, blogs en samenwerkingen met maatschappelijke organisaties.

Deze interviewreeks wordt inhoudelijk ondersteund door Giving Insights. Giving Insights Exchange brengt onderzoekers en professionals uit de filantropische sector samen om de uitwisseling tussen wetenschap en praktijk te versterken.

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