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**Our Common Commons: Policies for
Sustaining Volunteer Energy**

Abstract: Brudney and Meijs (2009) conceive of volunteer energy as a social resource that constitutes the basis for (organizationally based) volunteering. They show that volunteer energy can be compared to a human-made, renewable resource that can be grown and recycled – but likewise one that is subject to misuse and misappropriation that can imperil the vitality of the resource. They explain that to a certain extent, volunteer energy is a common pool resource with free access for all volunteer-involving organizations, especially given the trend that people are less committed to one organization. As a consequence, volunteer-involving organizations must be collectively interested in making more volunteer energy available, now and in the future. As with other resources, sustaining the volunteer resource is becoming an issue. Thus, the need arises to develop an approach to the collective challenge of governing the volunteer energy commons. To this challenge we apply the design principles of Elinor Ostrom (1990) for robust governance of the common pool resource.

Keywords: volunteering, volunteerism, common pool resources, governance

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Introduction

Around the globe, and more specifically in the Western world, (national) governments, civil society organizations, educational institutions and even profit-making firms are involved in creating (more) opportunities for people to volunteer. Morrison and Salipante (2007, p. 210) have called for a “broadened accountability environment,” implying that more parties should be involved in volunteerism than currently are, using the impact of volunteering on meeting different needs of the community now and in the future as the measure of effectiveness. Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, and Hustinx (2010) endorse this “third party” involvement in which the goals of third-party organizations, such as

businesses, are linked to volunteering, for example, as human resource management and marketing goals often coalesce in corporate volunteering. Like government and nonprofit organizations, for business as a third party, an underlying concern is about the sustainability of volunteering.

Brudney and Meijs (2009) share this concern about sustainability: They compare volunteer energy to a resource and analyze it from this perspective. In their work, volunteer energy is seen as the raw input for the organizational processes that turn willingness of people into actual volunteering. As a result, a new approach for understanding volunteerism is developed. It shows that volunteer energy can be compared to a human-made, renewable resource that can be grown and recycled, and whose continuation and volume of flow can be influenced by human beings positively as well as negatively. A positive influence is useful for sustaining or even growing current levels of volunteer energy and volunteering. By contrast, negative volunteer management practices, if used widely enough, can diminish the volunteer energy resource and the pool of volunteers in a similar manner as mismanagement of endangered animal species, forests, or other resources jeopardizes their sustainability. As with any metaphor, likening volunteering to a natural or social resource needs to be accompanied by a disclaimer. Nevertheless, by using this metaphor, Brudney and Meijs (2009) present a better understanding of the growing concern over the sustainability of volunteering.

Following this concern, Brudney and Meijs (2009) describe the need for a new “regenerative” approach to volunteer management. They propose to shift the nexus of volunteer management from an organizational matter to a community issue. In order to secure the future of volunteer energy as a resource, a broad array of stakeholders must be involved, a factor that helps to explain why the sustainability of volunteer energy presents a challenge for collective action, rather than an individual organizational difficulty. Again, this perspective is comparable to new approaches in, for example, sustainable forest management that not only involve growers and harvesting companies but also consumers, who are asked to make a difference with their buying power (Vlosky, Ozanne, and Fontenot 1999).

This article addresses this higher level of volunteer management in the community. In this article we focus on developing a new policy and approach to the collective challenge of governing the volunteer energy commons. The article takes Brudney and Meijs’s (2009) emphasis on the need for collective action to prevent the misuse of volunteer energy one step further: It explores how to translate the idea of a collective approach into policies and governance. Preferably, the locus of this policy formulation and governance would be a community-wide organization that possesses sufficient authority. In some

countries, probably those with a corporatist nonprofit regime (Salamon and Anheier 1998), this organization could be a volunteer centre funded by local government. In other countries, especially those with a liberal nonprofit regime (Salamon and Anheier 1998), this organization could be a community foundation or a “united way” type of organization that marshalls community needs.

To see to the future of volunteering at the community level, we apply 2009 Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom’s eight design principles for robust resource (common pool) governance. Based on this framework the article proposes a set of questions to be considered in preparing a policy document for governing the volunteer energy resource. The questions raised in this article pertain to difficult issues that have not before been extended to volunteer energy. The result is intended to provide a blueprint for developing a policy that might be applied for governing volunteer energy by, for example, community foundations, volunteer centers, or governments.

Volunteer energy as a (common pool) resource

Brudney and Meijs (2009) show that volunteer energy, indeed, resembles a human-made, renewable resource that can be grown as well as imperiled by the actions of human beings. Volunteer energy is the willingness of people to donate time that constitutes the raw material that organizations transform into organizational volunteering in different forms (assignments) based upon a) the availability of time of the volunteers and b) the assets, or the relevant “talents, capabilities, knowledge, and expertise” that volunteers bring to this activity (Brudney and Meijs 2007, 69). Although all volunteer energy may seem alike, it comes in various forms or modalities. Based on a comparison of volunteer energy to natural resources, three different metaphors of volunteering can be distinguished: “oil,” representing traditional volunteering; “fish,” representing new forms of volunteering; and “solar power,” resembling spontaneous and episodic volunteering.

Oil, as volunteering, is easy to use or “extract” and is immediately transferable into ongoing volunteering and organizational work and productivity. However, the traditional ongoing volunteer who would contribute a steady amount of volunteering on a regular basis, is too often (mis)used for less-fitting assignments and sometimes even over used, so that habitual patterns of volunteering are declining (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003). As a consequence, it is becoming scarce and expensive for organizations to obtain volunteers, hence, governments and others have raised concerns over sustainability, the basis

for conceiving this article. By contrast, “fish” cannot be seen as a uniform resource: many different species of fish exist, each requiring a different method of “catching” and “nurturing.” With respect to volunteering, fish refers to the new approaches to volunteering, such as community service, done-in-a-day projects, volunteer “singles,” family volunteering, voluntourism, and corporate volunteering. In most cases, these new forms of volunteering are operated as separate programs by the volunteer-involving organization, and they involve a third party, including business firms or educational institutions that represent or organize the volunteers (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, and Hustinx 2010). The fish metaphor emphasizes that sustaining and growing the volunteer energy resource is also affected by general developments in society, such as the economy, government policies, and changes in demographics. Hustinx and Meijs (2011) propose new functional and normative interventions to re-embed volunteering in the collective agenda of individuals, organizations, and society.

Finally, “solar power” is a natural resource that is always available, but unfortunately not when we need it most. Solar power, as volunteering, resembles spontaneous volunteering (Sharon 2004), or from an organizational viewpoint, unplanned, episodic donations of time (Cnaan and Handy 2005). The problem is that volunteering, by contrast to financial donations, must be used when made available – or otherwise it will be lost to the organization and its clients. Individuals visiting a community who find a few hours to assist a local food pantry, for example, must be accommodated then, or not at all. Volunteer-involving organizations can use different types of volunteer energy simultaneously.

Although each form of volunteer energy may require distinct management techniques, and organizations may use different types of volunteers altogether, abuse of the resource by organizations through mismanagement harms the prospects of other users (organizations) of obtaining and harnessing volunteer energy because volunteers become less interested and willing to continue contributing their time. Thus, in some respects, volunteer energy resembles a common pool resource in which the users have to cooperate to prevent deterioration of the resource or, perhaps, even to avert a “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968). That is, “using up volunteers” through improper treatment can harm the supply for all potential users of the volunteer energy commons in the future.

As with other resources, volunteer energy will be sustainable when the need of the current generation is satisfied without harming the potential satisfaction of the need of future generations (Brundtland 1987). From the perspective of volunteer-involving organizations and communities, sustainability is realized when the concepts and practices of commitment and volunteering are

transferred from one generation to the next. Misuse of volunteers by a volunteer-involving organization should, thus, be seen as pollution of the resource of volunteer energy that endangers future. A negative volunteering experience lowers the willingness of people to volunteer again, and absent a compelling motivation, reduces the amount of volunteer energy available to organizations and causes. Research on the life cycle perspective of volunteering shows that people will likely migrate to other volunteer-involving organizations and other volunteer challenges over time (e.g., Safrit, Scheer, and King 2001; Oesterle, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Mortimer 2004), so that volunteer experiences in one organization can affect their willingness and interest to volunteer again.

Brudney and Meijs (2009) demonstrate the need for a new “regenerative” approach to volunteer management. Whereas traditional volunteer management places the volunteer involving organization at the centre of attention, a regenerative approach considers and incorporates the community perspective, which involves all stakeholders and focuses on the long term, taking into account the future impact, recyclability, lifetime value and prolonged interaction of volunteer energy. The regenerative volunteer management approach, thus, broadens the scope of volunteer involvement to consider the volunteer, the host organization, and the community (Brudney and Meijs 2009). This article addresses the community level.

Much more can be learned about the societal perspective of the regenerative, community approach to managing volunteer energy by applying the research of Ostrom (1990; Ostrom et al. 2002) on managing and governing common pool and natural resources (see also the Digital Library of the Commons of the International Association for the Study of the Commons¹). We now turn to that analysis.

Ostrom’s eight design principles for common pool resource management

Grounded in a long history of research, Ostrom (1990) presents eight design principles that are needed to create effective and enduring common pool resource (CPR) institutions. Table 1 briefly presents and defines Ostrom’s (1990) design principles: clearly defined boundaries; local rules; collective-choice

¹ <http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/>

Table 1: Design principles illustrated by long-enduring CPR institutions.

1	Clearly defined boundaries
	Individuals or households who have rights to withdraw resource units from the CPR must be clearly defined, as must the boundaries of the CPR itself
2	Congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions
	Appropriation rules restricting time, place, technology and/or quantity of resource units are related to local conditions and to provision rules requiring labor, material and/or money
3	Collective choice arrangements
	Most individuals affected by the operational rules can participate in modifying the operational rules
4	Monitoring
	Monitors, who actively audit CPR conditions and appropriator behavior, are accountable to the appropriators or are the appropriators
5	Graduated sanctions
	Appropriators who violate operational rules are likely to be assessed graduated sanctions (depending on the seriousness and context of the offense) by other appropriators, by officials accountable to these appropriators, or by both
6	Conflict-resolution mechanism
	Appropriators and their officials have rapid access to low cost local arenas to resolve conflicts among appropriators or between appropriators and officials
7	Minimal recognition of rights to organize
	The rights of appropriators to devise their own institutions are not challenged by external governmental authorities
	<i>For CPRs that are parts of larger systems</i>
8	Nested enterprises
	Appropriation, provision, monitoring, enforcement, conflict resolution, and governance activities are organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises

Source: Ostrom (1990, 90).

arrangements; effective monitoring; graduated sanctions; cheap conflict resolution; recognized self-determination; and nested enterprises. In this section these eight principles are applied to the resource of volunteer energy.

What are the boundaries of a local volunteer commons?

The first design element specified by Ostrom (1990) is clearly defined boundaries for the commons. Two questions arise with respect to a volunteer energy commons. First, what is volunteer energy and volunteering? Second, who are the appropriators (users) of volunteer energy? The issue of *what is volunteering* has been the topic of fundamental research. Smith (1981) explains that volunteering always is “a matter of degree.” In a groundbreaking article, Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth (1996) place volunteerism on a continuum

with four key dimensions: (1) free will, (2) availability of rewards to the volunteer, (3) structure, and (4) the intended beneficiaries of volunteering. The authors state that:

The broadest definitions would define court-ordered volunteers or students in a required service program as volunteers. Less broad definitions would also define as volunteers those whose employers expect volunteer service as a condition for employment or promotion. According to the purist definitions, none of these could be considered volunteers, only those who volunteer freely and without coercion or obligation. (Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth 1996, 370)

The public likely uses a stricter, more “pure” perception of volunteering than the volunteer-involving community, which varies across cultures (Handy et al. 2000; Meijs et al. 2003). This variation is germane to the second design element: adapting to local circumstances (see below).

The second question raises the issue of which organizations are the users of volunteer energy, and which organizations might like to make use of this resource. In crafting a policy for application by the volunteer commons, several boundary criteria might productively be considered. The commons and the volunteer-involving organizations might be defined by geographic borders or location (e.g., local, regional, state, or international), by sector, by legal status (e.g., only formally established organizations) and by policy domain or field (e.g., the volunteer energy commons for health care, or for culture, or sports). Although we can imagine that a commons is defined by a number of such criteria, the way in which one draws the boundaries is not a simple matter. For example, people might volunteer in one community and live in another, might be involved in playing a sport such as soccer, yet not volunteer for the sport association² but give time to health care institutions instead.

Volunteer centers and/or local governments can help to define and create such boundaries through minimal entry requirements into the collectivity that in return offer advantages for users of volunteer energy. By agreeing to be a member with the consequent behavioral rules, for example, users may receive listings from the volunteer center of potential volunteers or helpful information regarding volunteer involvement. A consortium of funders (e.g., a community foundation) may also play this role; funders can incentivize membership in the volunteer energy commons by tying eligibility for funding to participation in the collective concerned with sustaining volunteering.

² Making volunteering for the association obligatory, or offering a lower membership fee for organizational volunteers, is an effective and popular method to embed volunteering in associations (Hustinx and Meijs 2011).

What local circumstances need to be taken into account when implementing a governing system for the volunteer commons?

Ostrom (1990) shows that governing systems in effective common pool management differ greatly by local circumstances. We anticipate that some of the factors that may need to be taken into account include the cultural and structural position of volunteering in society, that is, whether volunteering is valued and prevalent in an area or region, or seen only as a marginal activity. Also, individual and community features can lead to differences, for example, as working class communities may have a different perspective than those that are more affluent.

The relative position of civil society in itself and in relation to government and the business sectors may matter as well, for example, whether the nation can be defined or described as corporatist, statist, liberal, or social democratic (Salamon and Anheier 1998), or the position of the “volunteering discourse” in relation to civic engagement. According to Hilger (2005), four such discourses pertain across different societies: whether volunteering is seen primarily from the perspective of creating value through providing services (welfare), expressing views and opinions (community), helping people to learn new skills and develop new services (economic), or forming and strengthening bonds among citizens (participation). If the emphasis is on welfare, the volunteer energy of citizens who are capable of performing the volunteer assignment will be most valued. If the emphasis is on learning new skills, the volunteer energy of people who cannot yet perform will receive priority. By contrast, if the goal is building participation, increasing volunteer energy will be more widely sought.

Ostrom (1990) also identifies the importance of congruence between the local conditions and the rules or collective choice arrangements that are established for the (local) commons. We turn to that issue next.

What kind of collective choice mechanisms can be applied to the volunteer commons?

Fundamental to the concept of a commons is the interaction among the participants; the actions of individual organizations have consequences for other organizations. Collective choice arrangements provide answers to fundamental questions regarding how participants or members of the commons meet, vote, and conduct their business. As already described, volunteer centers,

governments or (dominant) funders or foundations can create the platform for stakeholders to meet and establish the rules of engagement. Around the globe several of these platforms (see also Steins and Edwards 1999) exist that bring together stakeholders in a certain resource, such as the sustainable palm oil platform (<http://www.sustainablepalmoil.org/>) and the 4C association platform on sustainable coffee (<http://www.4c-coffeeassociation.org/our-services/sustainability-platform.html>). Establishing trust, reputation, and shared norms is crucial to this endeavor. As Ostrom (1990) points out, no one wants to have other members of the commons take advantage of or “poach” on their observance of the rules. If each partner is convinced that the others will cooperate, that is, make use of volunteer energy in the way that is agreed upon, collective choice arrangements can easily be accomplished. Trust can be difficult to achieve, but frequent reporting to the collective of positive activities of the members, especially those that highlight responsible behavior, can help to establish and maintain a climate in which trust is valued and important. As trust is fundamental to the existence of volunteer energy and to the mission and operations of many volunteer-involving organizations, it should be possible to create such a climate.

Nevertheless, several elements must be acknowledged. In many cases (external) policy makers underestimate the difficulties of managing a commons, for example, because of poor communication between policy makers and the users of the resource. Furthermore, policy is often imposed in a top-down manner (Steins and Edwards 1999), which is a warning sign for putting too much hope on the power of volunteer centers or foundations to arrange collective choice agreements. Dawes, McTavish, and Shaklee (1977, 3) present a solution:

First, the opportunity to communicate allows group members to get acquainted, which could raise their concern for each other’s welfare. Second, the relevant information shared through the discussion and appeals for mutual cooperation could persuade group members to cooperate. Third, group members’ statements of their own intended decisions could assure other members of their good intentions, leading to higher rates of cooperation.

The organizers of the volunteer energy commons, such as volunteer centers, governments, and foundations, should invest in a platform where volunteer-involving organizations can meet and conduct their affairs (Steins and Edwards 1999).

Of course volunteer energy is not a passive resource: Volunteers can give themselves voice. As a result, they can and should participate in setting the collective choice arrangements for the commons. This involvement should occur at two levels: in their own organization to ensure that volunteer management

systems are adapted to their wishes (level 1), and at the collective, community level to give feedback on current practices and to help decide on possible sanctions for volunteer-involving organizations that fail to cooperate (level 2). Volunteers should be an important party to the collective choice arrangements whose voice merits input. This vantage point moves the discussion to the next design principle: monitoring.

How can the status of volunteer energy (the resource) and volunteer management (the users) be monitored?

In order to govern the volunteer energy resource, one or more shared objectives are needed. Such objectives might pertain, for example, to different aspects of volunteering, such as increasing the amount of people that volunteer, improving the retention rate of volunteers, increasing the yearly influx of new volunteers, and improving the relative position of young people in volunteering. Depending on the shared objectives set, criteria for monitoring must be developed to assess the state of volunteer energy. Indicators might include the number of people who volunteer, the number of hours they donate, the demographics of volunteers, volunteer satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the experience, and over-time trends in these data.

Next to these basic data on the state of the resource itself, the behavior and perceptions of different stakeholders also need to be monitored: Are volunteer-involving organizations using state-of-the-art management systems? Are volunteers not only recruited but also retained? Are new “third parties” involved in volunteering, such as businesses, religious institutions, and schools? Are volunteer-involving organizations referring volunteers to one another so as to foster life-long volunteering? Based upon this information actions can be undertaken on this organizational level.

If the objective is to maximize or optimize the creation of volunteer energy in the commons, frequent reporting over-time of such characteristics as the number of volunteers, their longevity in volunteering, their rates of turn-over, etc., help volunteer-involving organizations to demonstrate progress toward collective goals. Since volunteering generates value for the volunteer, the volunteer-involving organization, and the collective, these indicators can provide useful guidance on the overall success or accomplishments of the volunteer energy commons.

More difficult to assess is the state of volunteer management. A growing body of research and commentary disputes a one-size-fits-all conception for the

effective management of volunteers (Hustinx 2010; Macduff, Netting, and O'Connor 2009; Rochester 1999) and consequently suggests that choice and evaluation of best management practices may vary depending on the context, even though volunteer-involving members of the commons might resemble one another. Monitoring members of the volunteer energy commons with respect to volunteer management practices in a general way would be possible (e.g., do member organizations have procedures for recruitment, orientation, screening, etc., of volunteers?), but evaluating more specific “best practices” would be problematic.

With regard to monitoring and evaluation, it could be perceived as fortunate that volunteers, unlike most other resources, have voice (see above) and can offer an indirect indication of the effectiveness of organizational practices, for example, via feedback. Giving feedback for monitoring and evaluation purposes applies to clients and client organizations as well, which may likewise appraise member behavior. Finally, it should prove possible to observe the participation of member organizations in collective activities, for example, in the promotion of volunteering and presenting community service opportunities. Non-participation could be construed as free rider behavior and subject to possible sanctioning by the members of the volunteer energy commons – an issue we turn to next.

What kind of graduated sanctions can be applied to organizations that misuse the volunteer commons or that are free riders?

Sanctions are an unavoidable part of collective arrangements that are needed for governing the volunteer energy commons. The ultimate sanction is to exclude an organization from using volunteer energy. Ostrom (1990) makes the point that sanctions should be graduated to allow for members of the commons to learn and recover. Thus, a first infraction should be treated differently and more leniently than repeated violations. The next violation might be subject to a policy of “shame and blame” in which the organizational violator is identified publicly, or might be (down) rated or graded on a publicly visible “star system” with the number of stars proportional to performance or compliance in the commons.

These kinds of rating systems are not very customary with respect to volunteer energy. However, these systems are familiar for donating money (e.g., Guidestar) and can be developed for donating time. If the locus of policy-making for the

volunteer-energy commons is, for example, a volunteer centre, a local government, or a community foundation, it might also be possible to exact financial sanctions, or a penalty in which the violator does not receive volunteer referrals, or is not allowed to participate in community service projects that can raise its profile. Another option might be to take away some of the advantages of the nonprofit status.

Ostrom (1990) furthermore insists that the monitors and sanctioners within a community should be either the members or participants themselves or the representatives of the members who are accountable to them. As this issue is particularly important when ownership rights of indigenous or powerless communities are at stake (see e.g., Anaya 2005), it might seem to be less crucial for volunteer energy. Generally people enjoy the freedom to choose the organization(s) in which they participate – in many countries guaranteed by the legal framework – and it is nearly impossible to prohibit potential volunteer access to volunteer-involving organizations, or to proscribe organizations from soliciting them (although cautioning potential volunteers regarding exploitation through a rating or certification system remains an option). So the ultimate sanction, forbidding a certain philanthropic organization from membership in the volunteer energy commons, is difficult. Yet, prohibition would not be impossible or even unusual, for example, in the case of NGOs that use terrorist tactics or entice donors through “scams.”

A related issue is recognizing the rights of monitors, governors, and sanctioners when volunteering is not a free choice, and thus the commons lacks some of the cooperative elements that can lead to self-correction. Consider, for example, countries where volunteering is obliged by the state (as it was in the former eastern European communist countries), or situations where volunteering is mandatory (e.g., as part of a court sentence or in return for welfare benefits). In these areas, it might be more difficult to monitor or sanction organizational behavior.

How can conflicts on the use of the volunteer commons be resolved?

The sixth design element specified by Ostrom (1990) is the importance of conflict resolution mechanisms. No matter how well the commons is governed, conflicts among volunteer-involving organizations or other stakeholders about the use of the volunteer energy resource are likely to arise. Some organizations might claim that others are using volunteers inefficiently, leading to squandering volunteer

energy that could have been used by them, or that other organizations are mismanaging volunteers, leading to “pollution”, and consequent decline, of the resource. For example, schools participating in service learning might complain that the activity requires too much oversight of student participants, while volunteer-involving organizations could be dissatisfied about the dominance of learning objectives over organizational work. An interesting debate among volunteer-involving organizations on the collective action level could be envisioned regarding the practice of keeping a waiting list of volunteers: for an organization, a waiting list might be taken as a sign of success, but from a commons perspective it might be seen as a waste of (spontaneous) volunteer energy that could otherwise be used by the commons of volunteer-involving organizations.

For (long-term) cooperation to flourish, in which partners respect one another and the volunteer commons over a protracted period of time, rules, procedures, and other mechanisms must be established to resolve problems and disputes among members. Again, the involvement of a volunteer centre, local government, or consortium of funders might facilitate this process. Working cooperatively with the members, they might create good practices on service learning, corporate volunteering, cross-organizational referring of volunteers, practices to prevent volunteer burn-out, etc.

What are the accepted self-organized, independent bodies that can make decisions on the volunteer commons?

This entity should be a trustworthy third party that can offer a virtual or actual meeting place for members of the commons to transact their business. Candidates for this office include: volunteer centres, local governments, and community foundations. Members of a commons need at least minimal recognition of the right to organize themselves. This provision seems an open door for the volunteer-energy commons, since volunteering itself is based on the right to self-organize. The challenge exists, though, that many of the members, especially the more well-established, may be highly dependent for their support on external parties such as funders. In that situation the potential certainly exists for these latter parties to impose their ideas on the volunteer energy commons. Yet, the volunteer-involving organizations, too, must enjoy the right to self-organize to create and govern the commons. Resolving the tension between supporters and members to give members predominant influence over the commons remains an issue in effective governance.

**How does the local volunteer commons relate to other volunteer commons, such as in other communities or nations, and how does the local volunteer commons relate to other local modules of participation, for example, paid work, education and family obligations?
(Nested enterprises)**

Commons are part of larger systems. As a consequence, all of the design principles discussed above have to be organized in multiple layers of nested enterprises in which rules must also be set. With respect to volunteer energy, nested enterprises can exist when people volunteer in different commons (e.g., in different communities or in different policy areas). Another system of nested enterprises is created when the commons includes local chapters of national organizations that have their own rules on how to use volunteer energy, or when volunteer energy is placed in the perspective of other “greedy institutions” in society (Coser 1974) that make demands on people’s time. Thus, government may impose rules on jurisdictions that affect the use of volunteer energy and its governance, such as raising the age for receiving full retirement benefits, requiring community service for various groups of people, and establishing volunteering criteria for graduation from school. Companies might create policies on pre-retirement volunteering, flexible work schedules, and general awareness of volunteering for the community. Such factors impact both the demand for and the supply of volunteer energy, and raise issues for effective governance of the commons.

Conclusion

Brudney and Meijs (2009) conceive of volunteering metaphorically as a natural resource to develop a new approach to volunteering. They show that volunteer energy can be compared to a human-made, renewable resource that can be grown and recycled – but likewise one that is subject to misuse and misappropriation that can imperil the vitality of the resource. They compare volunteer energy to a common pool resource in which volunteer-involving organizations may be more interested in exploiting the commons for their own purposes in the short run rather than in developing or preserving it to make more volunteer energy available in the present as well as in the future for the entire community. Brudney and Meijs (2009) are concerned that because volunteers are typically viewed as plentiful and inexpensive, and individual volunteer-involving

organizations stand to reap the benefits of volunteer use (and misuse) while the commons of organizational users pay the costs of volunteer mismanagement (in terms of volunteer energy lost to the commons), the danger exists that fewer volunteers will become available in the future.

Thus, the need arises to develop an approach to overcome the collective challenge of governing the volunteer energy commons. Although this perspective of joint responsibility for the resource is new to the volunteer community, this challenge is far from unique. The conceptualization applied here is based on the eight design principles articulated by Ostrom (1990) for robust resource pool governance, which have been used extensively in other contexts: clearly defined boundaries; local rules; collective-choice arrangements; effective monitoring; graduated sanctions; cheap conflict resolution; recognized self-determination; and nested enterprises.

In this article we begin to apply these principles to the governance of the volunteer energy commons and present a series of questions that must be considered in preparing a policy document for governing the volunteer energy commons. Public managers must be aware of this need to create a general policy on sustaining volunteering in the community, taking into account the needs of future generations. The result should serve as a blueprint, or at least a start, for developing a policy for governing the volunteer energy commons. Such a policy could be developed and implemented by a local volunteer centre, a local government, or a community foundation. Since volunteer energy is “intangible” and a social construct, probably the most important first step is to establish clear boundaries and create a list of stakeholders of the commons. These stakeholders should include current and potential volunteer-involving organizations, volunteer providing third parties (see Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, and Hustinx 2010), clients, and of course, the volunteers themselves.

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