This book seeks to contribute to the continuing debate about the role of voluntary nonprofit organizations in democratic welfare states. Most discussions of voluntary organizations tend to be long on sentiment and short on evidence. I have tried to correct this imbalance and to dispel the mystique surrounding voluntary agencies by using as the core of the book empirical data from a comparative analysis of 75 voluntary agencies serving the physically and mentally handicapped in the United States, England, the Netherlands, and Israel. The findings and the generalizations I have drawn from them will, I hope, suggest some new ways of thinking about the issues of governmental-voluntary relationships that face all welfare states.

Throughout history the determination of what rightfully belongs to Caesar has been one of the fundamental challenges facing all social institutions. In the field of social welfare there has been a recurrent quest for principles that would maintain a balance between the state and the interests of the individuals and groups comprising it. Despite the importance of voluntary agencies, however, there have been few analyses of the policy issues concerning them and little data that might suggest what can be realistically expected of them. If the welfare state is to continue—and there are no signs of its disappearance, although its growth rate has slowed—then pressures to make greater use of nongovernmental organizations to carry out public purposes will probably continue. Under these circumstances, it would be desirable to make a more persuasive case for voluntary organizations than the usual mix of expediency—more elegantly, pragmatism—and the values of pluralism.

This study, the first of its kind, is inevitably exploratory. I am aware of the inadequacies of some of the cross-national data and of the hazards of generalizing from limited and occasionally imprecise findings. I offer this report and its conclusions with the understanding that the results stand as hypotheses to be discussed, evaluated, and tested in other settings or fields of service.
In the process of demystifying the voluntary agency, I take a fresh look at such concepts as voluntarism, innovation and pioneering, autonomy, the “partnership” with government, accountability, and advocacy. Because the focus of the study is on the voluntary agency as an organization and the similarities and differences in agencies’ respective sociopolitical contexts, the design does not include an assessment of community needs and resources or an analysis of the problems and perceptions of clientele.

I have attempted to write for readers with a variety of interests in governmental-voluntary relationships. These include social scientists who have a special concern with organization theory and with the convergence of modern societies and welfare states. As a research monograph, this book offers some comparative empirical data on the effects of selected environmental and organizational variables on the performance of voluntary agencies as innovators, advocates, promoters of citizen participation, and providers of social services. Voluntary agencies, like all other organizations, fall short of achieving their multiple goals, and I examine some of the possible explanations.

In the spirit of Richard M. Titmuss, who urged us to combine the pessimism of social science with the optimism of social policy, I have also addressed myself to those directly involved with the use of the voluntary agency as a nongovernmental provider of public services. This includes board and executive staff members of voluntary agencies and their professional counterparts in government—legislators and public officials who decide who should provide what social services to whom. Perhaps the findings and the conceptual clarification I present may be useful in evaluating the costs and benefits of utilizing government, voluntary, or profit-making organizations, or informal social networks, for service delivery.

In such a value-laden area, it is important to make one’s preferences clear. Although I have tried to be objective, I regard myself as a supporter of voluntarism, strongly committed to the importance of maintaining an effective and influential nonprofit sector. At the same time, I do not believe in elevating voluntarism by denigrating government or in exaggerating the virtues and minimizing the inherent deficiencies of voluntary action. Injustice, inequity, and inefficiency are found in both the voluntary and governmental sectors. I see a place for both, as well as a role for profit-making organizations and informal social networks, as major channels for helping people to cope with the problems of living in an industrial society. What should be the proper role and
interrelationships of each sector remains to be discovered, and perhaps this book can contribute to that quest by providing a rough map of the area. Naturally, there is no single correct map, but the ideas developed here may be a guide to more systematic efforts in developing a theory of voluntary organizations in the welfare state.

I began this research to follow up a study of government-sponsored programs of citizen participation in community development in Israel and the Netherlands. In the course of my research, I became interested in the influence that Israeli voluntary organizations outside the political structure have on social policy. I then decided to broaden the scope of the inquiry to include other functions of voluntary organizations: pioneering, the promotion of citizen participation, and service delivery. Because of my long-standing concern about the future of voluntary organizations in welfare states, a broader international comparative dimension was added by including England and the United States, countries with which I had some familiarity. Because of its small size, Israel was selected for the pilot study in 1972-73, and from this start I developed the theoretical framework and methodology that was subsequently used for the other three countries.

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