

VOLUNTEERS RISING: GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT TO CHANGE ABANDONED CHILDREN'S LIFE IN RUSSIA.

Maria Ilinceva Cerkasina
Prague College

The importance of volunteerism in a society has been widely acknowledged by a number of authors (Almond & Verba, 1989; Putnam, 2000). It has been claimed that volunteerism promotes 'reflection on social problems, the articulation of collective values, and the development of political goals in a society' (Dekker & Halman, 2003:9).

There is a significant difference between societies with a long history of continuous volunteerism development and those where it is just at the beginning of its road to popularity (Howard, 2003).

As one of the post-communist countries, Russia is an example of a society where volunteerism, while certainly with some development history, is still very weak (Juknevičius & Savicka, 2003). Ever since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, volunteerism has been on the rise there, even though at uneven rates throughout the years. Among others, there are signs of rapidly spreading mass grassroots activity aimed at solving one of the ugliest social problems that the country faces: the fate of the sick and/or abandoned children whose count in Russia presently stands at about one million (the official number is 800,000) (Everychild, 2006).

For international audience, this situation allows for witnessing the birth of a local grassroots civil activity with all the small rises and falls, problems and successes that inevitably accompany such process. It also allows for comparative study of volunteerism growth in different developing countries.

The article attempts to analyze the contemporary grassroots social welfare volunteer and philanthropy movement in Russia, concentrating mainly on the volunteers helping sick and/or abandoned children. In doing so, it aims to cover the following issues:

- brief history of the current volunteer movement;
- portrait of a typical contemporary volunteer in Russia and how volunteerism is understood in this country;
- scale and scope of volunteer action, its relation to current public policy and development process;
- future perspectives

The underlying data has been obtained from the following sources:

- Interviews with experts
- Interviews with volunteers
- Analysis of secondary resources

- Over 2 years of work experience administering a grassroots charity project benefitting abandoned children in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

The main findings are the following:

- Volunteer activity in Russia is still small-scale compared to the Western world
- Helping sick and abandoned children appears to be one of the largest fields for grassroots volunteering and philanthropy
- Volunteering for this cause is popular throughout the country; however, most (disproportionate to population) recordable activity is observed in and around two major cities of the country, Moscow and St.Petersburg
- The majority of volunteers do not consider themselves 'volunteers' by their own definition and dislike the term in general.
- A typical Russian volunteer helping abandoned children is a woman age 25-40, with children, with higher education, living in a larger city with easy access to internet.
- This grassroots activity is bringing about significant change in the life of affected children and equipment of institutions where these children are kept
- There appear to be signs that as they acquire experience, most volunteers switch from aid to advocacy-related activity
- There seem to be signs of continuous growth of volunteering and philanthropy in this field, both in scope and scale

Overall, while there is certain pessimism about the role of grassroots volunteers in solving the social problem mentioned above (in comparison to the role of the government), practice appears to show significant positive changes in the regions where volunteer activity is the strongest. Other factors remaining the same, this allows for a positive prognosis for the future.

REFERENCES:

1. Almond G.A., Verba S. (1989) *The Civic Culture*, Newbury Park: Sage.
2. Dekker P., Halman L. (2003), Volunteers and Values: An Introduction, in Dekker P., Halman L. (eds.) (2003) *The Values of Volunteering*, New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
3. Everychild (n.d.) *Russia: Country Review*, URL: <http://www.everychild.org.uk/article/russia>, last accessed May 19, 2007.
4. Juknevičius S., Savicka A. (2003), From Restitution to Innovation: Volunteering in Postcommunist Countries, in Dekker P., Halman L. (eds.) (2003) *The Values of Volunteering*, New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
5. Howard M.M. (2003) *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
6. Putnam R.D. (2000) *Bowling Alone*, New York: Simon & Schuster.