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Michael Marco, Florence Rodhain, Angélique Rodhain

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**Volunteerism as a tool for Entrepreneurship and Education  
through a socio-economical activity in the context of the  
International Township Project of Auroville.**

**Michaël MARCO**

PhD Student

MRM : Montpellier Research in Management  
University of Montpellier 2 – FRANCE  
Quiet Beach, 606101 Auroville, Tamil Nadu, INDIA  
+91 96 26 0123 18  
[av.michael.savi@gmail.com](mailto:av.michael.savi@gmail.com)

**Florence RODHAIN**

Associate Professor

MRM : Montpellier Research in Management  
University of Montpellier 2  
Place Eugène Bataillon – 34090 Montpellier  
FRANCE  
[florence.rodhain@univ-montp2.fr](mailto:florence.rodhain@univ-montp2.fr)

**Angélique RODHAIN**

Associate Professor

MRM : Montpellier Research in Management  
University of Montpellier 2  
Place Eugène Bataillon – 34090 Montpellier  
FRANCE  
[angelique.rodhain@univ-montp2.fr](mailto:angelique.rodhain@univ-montp2.fr)

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# Abstract Paper

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*Volunteerism as a tool for Entrepreneurship and Education through a socio-economical activity in the context of the International Township Project of Auroville.*

This project consists in studying the activity of volunteerism in Auroville, its impact in the development of the township.

The goal is to demonstrate how it can be improved with a better organization, coordination and communication within Auroville for the benefits of everybody.

And finally it is hoped that this research may find a way to explain why it should be considered as a real form of education, and how it can be applied in the world.

Volunteerism as a new way of defining the term 'work' is a growing phenomena in Auroville and in the world. More and more people from all ages and socio-cultural backgrounds are making the decision to leave the studies/occupation they were pursuing to dedicate their energy as a volunteer working for free somewhere, usually in another country.

In Auroville many different units are using volunteerism for their creation, their current activity and their development. According to the statistics done based on the registration form that the foreigners have to fill in when they come to Auroville, we know that among 10,000 visitors, 2,500 are volunteers. With a population of 2,300 people, the volunteers are objectively taking an important part of the development of the township.

For the entrepreneurs in Auroville the volunteers represent a real added-value. On one hand the volunteers are enthusiastic people who decide to dedicate their energy for projects in which they believe and for which they are not even asking for a salary. This gives then to the managers real motivated workers for no cost and with a great sense of initiatives. On the other hand the fact of being a volunteer give them the freedom of taking initiatives, of not being bound by the liabilities or the limit of a labor system. This fact can make them be more self-confident that is the first quality of an entrepreneur. In that way, volunteerism can become an entrepreneur incubator.

In fact in Auroville, several managers can witness that it is thanks to the volunteers that they got their success and the development they wished for their enterprises.

# Full Paper

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*Volunteerism as a tool for Entrepreneurship and Education through a socio-economical activity in the context of the International Township Project of Auroville.*

## **Introduction**

Numerous studies confirm that when people engage in volunteerism, the result is increased absorption, retention, attraction, morale, and other such positive benefits.

In the city of Auroville, it is the concept of volunteerism itself which runs the city; indeed Aurovilians are considered as volunteers and stewards of the township, and it has been thus since 1968 that its inhabitants have dedicated their lives to this project. Recent studies in Auroville show that even among visitors to the city, a considerable number of them are dedicating their time to volunteer, for short or long periods, to contribute to the development of the township project.

What is driving them then? What are the benefits for the city, the entrepreneurs and the individuals? How has this alternative way of working shaped the development of an international city that is growing as well on the economical aspect as the spiritual? How has volunteerism contributed to the growth of projects in Auroville which have achieved international dimensions? How can this concept be implemented in classical organizations in a way to benefit all, employers and employees?

As we are here studying entrepreneurship, it is interesting to read Professor Israel Kirzner when he describes the entrepreneur as the man who perceives and pursues economic opportunities in the face of uncertainty and for whom alertness is the fundamental quality. Alertness is the entrepreneur's ability to perceive new economic opportunities that no prior economic actor has yet recognized. The entrepreneurial function is possible due to the presence of sheer ignorance on the part of some economic actors. Sheer ignorance, in Kirzner's definition, consists of not only not knowing a given piece of information but also of not knowing that one does not know it: no consideration of the information – positive or negative – even enters the economic actor's mind.

The entrepreneur constantly remedies sheer ignorance and corrects sheer error. Through his alertness, the entrepreneur foresees economic developments that other actors have overlooked.

Volunteerism can then be seen as an economic opportunity of development not recognized yet by the other economic actors. This is the reason why a keener eye on the phenomena of volunteerism and its contribution to self development and economical growth, is indispensably called for.

This subject calls for a look at the relation between volunteerism and organization; the concept of 'work' itself can then be reviewed in order to find out what benefits volunteerism can bring into the frame of classical organization.

An inquiry into a study of volunteerism shows clearly the importance for better understanding of human-resources management, the organization of work that considers the interest of employers and employees, and the inspiration of spirituality as a driving force for self and economical development.

These themes are presented by the term 'volunteerism' which can be defined as a form of work which finds its specificity in the fact that the people employed are not receiving any financial remuneration in exchange for working. It is especially on this aspect of the work that a spiritual approach to an economical activity is revealed.

Volunteerism indeed represents a platform of interaction where financial profit does not take place, but where business can still be successful.

A spiritual enquiry is here facilitated by the gratification, mostly intangible, received in exchange of work. The experience of being a 'worker' in resonance with the 'work' being done is just what the volunteer personally expects.

This gives rise to the essential question: Can volunteerism be a real opportunity for entrepreneurs to get motivated and dedicated people driven solely by intangible energy to work on the development of tangible projects?

The study of this question justifies then the adoption of the following plan:

On the first hand, the study of volunteerism will be a study of the mutual benefits brought about through collaboration between employers and employees in the context of employees offering their resources and employers hiring volunteer workers.

On the second hand, the study of volunteerism in India will be in the context of its traditional Gurukul system and thus its application and manifestation in the International Township Project of Auroville which was established on the philosophy and principles of two well-known Gurus namely Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

### **Volunteerism - a mutually beneficial collaboration between employers and employees:**

Numerous beneficial rewards have been proven in businesses, big or small, where employees are volunteers offering their resources and energy for no monetary remuneration.

In fact through volunteerism a virtuous circle can mutually benefit employees and then employers.

By offering their expertise, volunteers are able to refine and enhance their job skills while increasing networking opportunities; this is particularly poignant for recent college graduates. AAA of Northern California has found a positive correlation between employee promotions and those who volunteer. The company attributes this relationship to increased visibility of employee skills to management.<sup>1</sup>

In order to have an idea of the extent of this phenomena in USA, the Corporation for National and Community Service in a survey made in 2003 shows that 63.8 million Americans did voluntary service via their companies.

The energy and sense of fulfillment can carry over to a work situation and sometimes helps to relieve tensions and foster new perspectives for old situations. Sometimes a volunteer experience can lead you to something you never even thought about or help you discover a hobby or interest you were unaware of. Volunteering is a brilliant way to get life experience. Volunteering brings together a diverse range of people from all backgrounds and walks of life. Both the recipients of your volunteer efforts and your co-workers can be a rich source of inspiration and an excellent way to develop your interpersonal skills.<sup>2</sup>

The Corporation for National and Community Service, with series of studies and researches shows the benefits of volunteerism<sup>3</sup>:

- A strong relationship between volunteering and health: those who volunteer have lower mortality rates, greater functional ability, and lower rates of depression later in life than those who do not volunteer.
- Volunteering also leads to improved physical and mental health.
- Recent studies on the relationship between health and volunteering demonstrate that the benefits of volunteering are not limited to the recipients of the volunteer services.

Research also suggests that volunteer activities offer those who serve more than just a social network to provide support and alleviate stress; volunteering also provides individuals with a sense of purpose and life satisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

A study of adults aged 65 and older found that the positive effect of volunteering on physical and mental health is due to the personal sense of accomplishment that an individual gains from his or her volunteer activities<sup>5</sup>

A study found that, in general, volunteers report greater life satisfaction and better physical health than do non-volunteers, and their life satisfaction and physical health improves at a greater rate as a result of volunteering<sup>6</sup>.

Similarly a study of data from the Americans' Changing Lives survey found that those who volunteered in 1986, reported higher levels of happiness, life-satisfaction, self-esteem, a sense of control over life, and physical health, as well as lower levels of depression in 1989 and were more likely to volunteer again<sup>7</sup>.

The top business benefits associated with supporting volunteer activities included<sup>8</sup>:

- providing personal development opportunities for employees (76%)
- helping to motivate staff (72%)
- bringing new skills/experience/ideas into the organization (69%)
- enhancing corporate reputation (69%) or making it more respected (60%)

A survey carried out by Time Bank through Reed Executive showed that among 200 of the UK's leading businesses:

- 73% of employers would recruit a candidate with volunteering experience over one without.
- 94% of employers believe that volunteering can add to skills.
- 94% of employees who volunteered to learn new skills had benefited either by getting their first job, improving their salary, or being promoted.

A business also benefits from promoting volunteerism. According to a survey of 248 volunteer-managers realized in 2000<sup>9</sup>, 97% felt employing volunteers provided a way to improve teamwork, 58% use the volunteer program for recruitment and employee retention, and 100% thought volunteering improved the company's image. Most importantly, companies that engaged in corporate social responsibility show a 10 year return on equity that was 10 percent higher than their competitors<sup>10</sup>.

"By paying more attention to community needs and pledging valuable skilled services to nonprofit organizations, companies are, consequently, strengthening employee retention, recruiting, teamwork and morale".<sup>11</sup>

The author Claire McCartney (Senior Researcher at Roffey Park Management College) said: "Volunteering is becoming increasingly important for employers - and not just for their corporate responsibility. It is clear that well managed policies to support staff wishing to take part in volunteer activities can deliver significant business benefits in areas such as staff development and retention."

The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development 2005 Flexible Working survey of 585 UK organizations, found that staff retention is the main reason for organizations introducing flexible working practices. In the same survey, of HR professionals, 70% said that flexible working had a positive effect on employee motivation: Volunteering for a successful business.

Half of the respondents reported a direct correlation between volunteerism and profitability. These efforts are paying off in the way of recruiting and retention. Entrepreneurs find more and more that people are joining the company not just for the job and the money, but for a sense of shared culture.<sup>12</sup>

Businesses that promote Family Volunteering report significant results<sup>13</sup>:

- 70% report improved public and community relations.
- 57% report greater employee commitment.

- 15% report more productive employees.
- 12% report fewer hours lost for family responsibilities.

To conclude with this first part, it is important to note that entrepreneurs can also consider volunteerism as an alternative human resource. Of course cost-related factors are the main deterrent to increasing volunteerism in small businesses. The three volunteer-costs that must be addressed then are worker productivity loss, employee compensation, and organizing the volunteer effort.

Corporate volunteers are integral to the success of non-profit organizations as they increase the quantity and quality of services rendered. Studies demonstrate that business volunteers provide expertise superior to general-population contributors, thereby maximizing community benefits<sup>14</sup>. Corporate volunteerism clearly impacts the success of non-profit services. Volunteers have helped in creating ways to measure the impact non-profits have had on individuals so that they can substantiate their work to funding sources. Volunteers have also helped non-profits translate their mission into specific action plans towards the community. Other areas of volunteer influence include the creation of strategic plans for fundraising, financial analysis, market research, and web site development.

The work done by volunteers and their contribution to professional project should then not be under-estimated. In fact it is for this reason that the project of Auroville finds its interest by using mainly volunteer force.

### **The traditional system of Gurukul as found working in the International Township Project of Auroville:**

The country of India is of particular importance in regard to its fabulous spiritual tradition. The aspect or notion of “guru” in its culture makes an important reference of how knowledge and guidance for self spiritual development is transmitted/exchanged through the dedication, commitment and energy that the student/devotee brings to the teacher or guide. In this way volunteerism became then a quite common notion among Indian people.

The Gurukul System is an ancient Indian concept of education, wherein the students received knowledge in several disciplines while residing with the teacher, also volunteering in household chores as part of his family. The Guru (teacher) was a guide, father and role-model.

Life in a Gurukul meant keeping strict discipline. Students lived in very simple surroundings, practiced celibacy and cultivated virtue and discipline under the custody of their guru’s confidence and attention. Students lived together as equals, regardless of their social status, and acquired the same knowledge from their guru. There were regular physical volunteer services that the pupils had to render to the teachers. They cooked their food, cleaned their shared environs, took care of the domestic animals and acquired knowledge of the texts. At the end of the training, students come out as responsible individuals.<sup>1516</sup>

In this system of education the gurus or teachers did not charge any fees and so in exchange for the teachings, the students were voluntarily serving their guru. In this way, the learning and living space was well maintained benefitting the community, while the students/volunteers received satisfaction from the teachings of the teacher/guru.

The high interest in this system is thus the relation between the exchange of learning and work.

This Gurukul system was the tradition in India but during the colonial era it began to be replaced by the system established by the colonizers and became almost extinct, save in some remote areas.

But even in this day and age, in India, there exists throughout the land numerous spiritual centers known as Ashrams. Here, people live together, dedicated to the teachings and philosophies of a Guru or spiritual master. While receiving spiritual upliftment and teachings, ashramites, as also devotees who visit daily contribute towards the maintenance and organization of the center. Thus in this country, it is not hard to find someone here 'offering service' or 'seva' at any point in time, in other words, volunteering.

In the case of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram (SAA) in Pondicherry thousands of volunteers arrive here every year from all over the world to offer their services to Ashram maintenance, teaching, farming, music arts & crafts. It is noteworthy that the SAA is one of the richest ashrams in India, demonstrating well the impressive contribution of volunteer service framed within a strong cultural tradition based on self spiritual development.<sup>1718</sup>

The SAA is all the more interesting for its Founders also founded, in 1968, the Universal Township of Auroville, 16 kilometers away from the Ashram, intended as a site for the manifestation of an actual human unity in diversity.

People from all countries of the world including India have in the past forty four years of its existence come to Auroville to contribute to its growth while endeavoring to live a life dedicated to human unity and international understanding.

Having spent a large number of the formative years planting trees and eking out a living in an arid and barren land, Aurovilians have today created a fertile forest in what was once desert and are now growing a sustainable community of their own. The lifestyle here reflects a universal culture of healthy living, beautiful handicraft, world music and dance, various healing practices, educational research and alternative & ecological ways of living, forestation, organic agriculture, village development, earth construction, alternative technologies, renewable energies, water treatment etc...

In this context though, the highly interesting facts on Auroville are the percentages regarding people who come here as volunteers.

With a population of only 2000 people, Auroville welcomes every year about 8 000 foreign visitors, among whom 28% arrive as volunteers<sup>19</sup>. It is clear then that volunteerism is of importance in the development of the International Township Project of Auroville.

Volunteers to Auroville mostly come from Europe and North America, and are not necessarily only young people in need of adventure but also mature people leaving their daily lives and occupations to come to serve in Auroville. Actually every category of age is represented here.

It is thus common in Auroville to be volunteering in a project in any one of its various fields of activity/research.

Auroville also provides numerous projects/units held by entrepreneurs who are in need of human resources. With such a small population in the city, entrepreneurs here have the choice between local employees and volunteers and it is very often that we can see both working together, creating then a synergy which profits the project.

The results of a survey of a large sample of entrepreneurs show that the majority of the units in Auroville owe their success to the input of volunteers. This resource permits them to start concretizing innovative ideas, to improve them and to launch projects on another level. In this context what is often happening is the combination of temporarily skilled workers (volunteers) and the permanent local people help to create a sustainable way of running projects. The economical aspect of volunteerism can then be contributing to the growth of the business but also to the development of human unity.

In regard to the organization of work of Aurovilians, it is important to mention the fact that for most of the activities in the town, there is no strict qualification required. Anyone can come and do what they would like to do. It is here where the important point of volunteerism takes place: the volunteer will only give his energy if he believes in the project for which s/he



will work. The motivation of being part a project which matches with her/his conviction is the main driving force of this alternative human resource.

And it is the same for visitors who come to spend their spare time, vacation, holiday in Auroville; they can only be working if they know that their work is serving a greater cause than their own interest or the interest of someone else. The organization then must take in consideration the implication of the volunteer in the purpose it serves by giving the means to the volunteer to understand it and give her/him the feeling to take part of it.

### **Conclusion:**

Communities are suffering due to the growth of secular societies but at the same time we can really bridge that expanding gap through volunteering. Volunteering is ultimately about helping others and having an impact on people's wellbeing. "What better way is there to connect with your community and give a little back? As a volunteer, you certainly return to society some of the benefits that society gives you." is the common speech among Aurovilians.

All these different surveys, studies and researches show clearly that the activity of volunteerism can really be a way of healing the soul. In fact, considering the physical body related to the spirit, it is by lightening the spirit with selfless actions, self-giving, and dedication that the body can receive the benefits of it. Relations of one to others can also change thanks to growth in self confidence and self esteem; the volunteer can spread around him/her an aura of serenity and well being which contributes as well to the happiness of others.

But is volunteerism able to work so well for anybody and any organization? By definition volunteers are people who voluntarily decide to dedicate their energy in exchange of intangible rewards. But what can we say about the people who don't have this inner impulse? Would it benefit them too?

To follow up with this study needs a keener eye on the education of people before beginning their professional life is needed, in order to see if the impulse of working in the same conditions as a volunteer can be activated.

A current study in Auroville shows already that people who came by chance to Auroville, have been very intrigued by the work of a volunteer and have been inspired to become a volunteer too. Usually, this first time experience has driven them to commit to another longer period as a volunteer. Thus, a sense of benefit from self-giving can already be seen. This survey has also shown up that in numerous different cases people who were enquiring about their future with existential questions (after high school, or university/college, or even after few or many years of working experience) have found a better understanding of their interests in life or at least got a good clue.

This inquiry on volunteerism shows then its high interest not only regarding the individual volunteers, but also the entrepreneurs and even any State interested in reducing health problems and expenses, unemployment and civic spirit of the citizens for a more ecological and social approach of life.

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