

Inclusion through volunteering: The facilitating role of community development practitioners in empowering recent migrants in New Zealand

By Solmaz Nazari

Recent migrants face challenges in settling in their new environments and contributing to their communities. Volunteering, as a community development activity, can play a significant role in building recent migrants' connections with their communities. Community development practitioners can act as facilitators to assist this process. Recognising this potential, Volunteering New Zealand (VNZ) initiated a project to engage with the managers of volunteering organisations to support them and their staff as community development practitioners. As facilitators, these practitioners could work with recent migrants to connect with their communities, thereby assisting both migrants and communities to realise the mutual benefits of community development through volunteering.

Connect, engage, share, and learn

The project started as VNZ's response to Immigration New Zealand's Migrant Settlement and Integration strategy (2017). The findings of the National Migrant Consultation report initiated by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) in 2018 revealed unique barriers and challenges for the participation of recent migrants in their new communities. These barriers prevented recent migrants from integrating into communities hence, restricting the potential benefits of recent migrants and host communities from inclusion and participation. Following a call by the MBIE for proposals to facilitate recent migrants' participation in their host community, VNZ was selected to conduct its proposed project to develop a strategy and a set of strategic initiatives. Focusing on the "inclusion" outcome of the strategy, VNZ conducted a two-year project to empower volunteer-involving organisations and volunteer managers to facilitate the participation of recent migrants in communities through volunteering. VNZ believed meaningful volunteering by migrants could play a significant role in building connections, bridging the gaps, and facilitate recent migrants' inclusion in new communities.

Furthermore, the project was designed to align with the International Standards for Community Development (IACD, 2018). These standards guided the project in shaping the desired outcomes as well as the process of achieving them. The standards were also used in planning, implementing, and reviewing actions and supports provided for volunteer-involving organisations, recent migrant volunteers, and host communities. More specifically, three standards were prominent for this project from the early stages: participatory planning, engaging with communities and promoting diversity and inclusion. Building on these three standards, the project was implemented based on the core principles of connect, engage, share, and learn. Incorporating these principles, the project aimed at using volunteering as a bridge to facilitate the participation of recent migrants in their new communities and

accelerate their inclusion. To do so, each core principle was correlated with a strategic goal which, in turn, resulted in a series of initiatives. This approach un-locked many mutual benefits for migrants and their communities, leading to more inclusive community development.

VNZ empowered Volunteer Centres to become facilitators of community development. When acting as facilitators, community development practitioners serve communities in various ways. First, they bring people together. This is particularly important in settings where cultural and social differences result in divisions within communities. Second, facilitators assist the organisational process required for mobilisation of communities to act. Third, they reveal power imbalances that might otherwise be ignored (Toomey, 2011). From there, it becomes evident that these community development facilitators play a particularly critical role for marginalised groups within communities, such as recent migrants who might not be readily welcomed and included within established communities.

The project was conducted in five stages. First, VNZ conducted research to better understand the experiences of recent migrant. The research aimed at identifying inclusion barriers facing recent migrants within new communities, in volunteering, and in engagement with Volunteer Centres and community organisations. Research showed that recent migrants continued to face challenges in being included within New Zealand communities; 37% of recent migrants had difficulty getting involved in communities, 21% did not feel welcome in communities, and 44% had experienced biased or unfair behaviour. Research also indicated that many recent migrants continued to face barriers to volunteering – including a lack of adequate information around volunteering opportunities – and some migrant volunteers had experienced biased behaviour while volunteering.

Second, the research findings were used to plan and deliver a series of workshops to support community organisations and Volunteer Centres in engaging with recent migrants and learning about their experiences, skills, and needs. Recent migrants who participated in this project included a diverse group of permanent residents, former refugees, and some temporary visa holders, such as long-term student and work visa holders. They came from different regions – e.g. Africa and the Middle East – and countries such as China, India, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom. The workshops introduced recent migrants to the concept of volunteering in New Zealand, the opportunities to volunteer locally, and their rights as a volunteer. The workshops also raised migrants' awareness about volunteering and how it could facilitate their inclusion in communities.

Third, the Connected Volunteering Programme was implemented to empower the network of local Volunteer Centres to support recent migrants. Focusing on supporting community and voluntary organisations to enhance the way they reach out to migrant communities, engage with new migrants and actively support migrants in volunteering activities, this programme aimed at connecting recent migrants with volunteering opportunities corresponding to their skills, needs, and aspirations. In the fourth stage, best practice tools were developed and incorporated into volunteering opportunities for recent migrants. These tools promoted inclusive, ethical, and impactful volunteering and supported recent migrant volunteers. In the last and fifth stage, VNZ interviewed recent migrant volunteers and

explored their experiences. These experiences were used to fine-tune the project and improve the mutual outcomes for communities and recent migrant volunteers.

The core community development values of this project include collaboration, meaningful participation, equality, inclusion, and respect for diversity. Through striving for these values, the project was able to enrich various community assets, including individuals, associations, institutions, and connections. The project successfully achieved its ultimate goal that was utilising volunteering to facilitate the participation and inclusion of recent migrants in the communities where they settled and harnessing the mutual benefits both for recent migrants and communities.

Additionally, the project was able to identify and address some of the challenges recent migrants face for participation in communities; for instance, lack of participation opportunities, difficulty in accessing relevant community-level information, varying perceptions and expectations, and lack of support. On the other hand, some challenges were also identified for communities in harnessing the benefits from the participation of recent migrants; this included awareness and overcoming bias and lack of effective communication with people from varying ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and national backgrounds. Through addressing these challenges, the project enabled community organisations to benefit from the participation and inclusion of recent migrant volunteers.

The Workshops and Connected Volunteering Programme gave many migrants the sense of confidence needed to take their first step into volunteering in New Zealand. Feedback received from participants indicated that the majority of recent migrant volunteers had a greater sense of belonging to New Zealand after completing either the workshop or Connected Volunteering programme. When asked about the benefits achieved through volunteering, participants indicated that it enabled them to make new friends, connect and support New Zealand communities, learn about New Zealand customs, culture, language and history, and to practice English. Here is the feedback received from one of the participants, Wael from Syria:

“This programme introduced me to volunteering. Through volunteering, I met people from the community who were working towards a common cause. Suddenly, I became part of the community. We shared smiles, laughs and friendships while working to help the community. Volunteering really opened doors for me. I have been here for two years, and Wellington now feels like home. It is a great feeling to belong here. My circle of friends has also gotten bigger because of volunteering.”

The post-programme survey showed that 73% of participants in the programme were still engaged in volunteering activities and 64% intended to keep volunteering in the future. Positive feedback from Volunteer Centres and community organisations confirmed the programme was successful in enabling them to better engage with recent migrant volunteers and facilitate their inclusion in communities.

VNZ will continue researching the volunteering experiences of recent migrants and how volunteering can assist them to overcome barriers they face for participation and inclusion in their communities. This continuous research will enable Volunteer Centres and community

organisations to harness the mutual benefits of participation and inclusion for recent migrant volunteers and their communities.

References:

International Association for Community Development. (2018). *Towards Shared International Standards for Community Development Practice*. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/VNZ04/Dropbox/Solmaz/IACD/IACD_31-Standards-Guidance-Summary-English.pdf

Toomey, A. H. (2011). Empowerment and disempowerment in community development practice: eight roles practitioners play. *Community Development Journal*, 46(2), 181-195.

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Photo 1: Workshop Facilitator, Ross Patel (VNZ) demonstrating the wide array of volunteering opportunities available to recent migrants. Geeta Patel was a workshop attendee contributing to the discussion and was interested in volunteering opportunities

Photo 2: A group of recent migrants who completed their volunteering workshop at Volunteering Northland.