

ASR Focus on Volunteer Labor in East Africa

Introduction: Volunteer Labor—Pasts and Futures of Work, Development, and Citizenship in East Africa

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Across the globe, voluntary labor is a prominent mode of engagement within development, humanitarian, and philanthropic activities, political activism, social justice movements, and religious organizations, and it is increasingly being used in welfare and health care provision (Milligan & Conradson 2006). Defined as the free giving of an individual's labor, time, and energy to a larger cause, collective goal, or public good, volunteerism is imbued with moral and political meaning. It implies the creation or enactment of attachment between the individual and a collective and carries assumptions about altruism, freedom, and a "politics of virtue"

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(Mindry 2001).¹ These definitions underscore the political and social purchase of volunteering. It is a powerful concept, capable of mobilizing individuals and groups to act for a common good. As such volunteering has been tied to political and social projects, and promoted by state and nonstate institutions for various ends.² The power of volunteerism is particularly apparent in East Africa—the subject of this *ASR* Focus—where volunteering has a long and rich history and voluntary labor has been reinterpreted through various citizenship and political projects since the colonial period.

While volunteering is a global phenomenon, it is also situated within historically specific political and economic contexts. Assumptions about altruistic action, freedom, and virtue that surround the concept do not therefore necessarily hold. Despite such ideals, the actual practice of volunteering is often riddled with tension. Volunteering may benefit the giver as much as the receiver. The lines between altruism and material reward, and between labor that is given freely and labor that is demanded by those in political authority, are often blurred. The relation between voluntary labor and paid work may be ambiguous, and the utility of volunteering within the labor market may be significant. Although imagined as progressive social action, voluntary labor as charitable, humanitarian, or development practice may reinforce inequalities between giver and recipient (Mittermaier 2014).

The importance of volunteering to social and political transformation, together with the ambiguity and the tensions in practices surrounding volunteering, makes it an important subject to study. Voluntary labor and volunteerism are emerging as a focus of scholarly attention (e.g., Allahyari 2000; Eliasoph 2011; Hilton & McKay 2011). In part this is because the political value of volunteer labor is being repositioned within neoliberal governance as states seek to shift responsibility for social welfare onto citizens. A growing literature on volunteerism in the global North situates the practice of volunteering within the rise of an “affective economy” that celebrates the harnessing of people’s compassion for others as a form of public utility and caring citizenship (Adams 2012; Hardt 1999; Muehlebach 2012). This scholarship argues that the relation between volunteers and the state has undergone a reversal. Whereas during much of the twentieth century voluntary labor was intimately associated with the harnessing of a national spirit to produce a fairer society (e.g., Titmus 1997), now volunteers “are tasked with taking the common good into their own hands” (Muehlebach 2012:38) as voluntary labor is used to provide solutions to social and economic problems that are considered to lie outside the formal reach of the state (Lacey & Ilcan 2006). The scope and meanings of global voluntarism within development, humanitarian, and environmental projects, and its relations to identity formation, work, careers, and global citizenship for youth from the global North, have gained some attention (e.g., Jones 2008; Lacey & Ilcan 2006; Lorimer 2010; McWha 2011; Parreñas 2012; Simpson 2004, 2005; Smith & Laurie 2011), while recent work explores volunteer

participation as religious and ethical practice within charitable work shaped by a “global moral economy of compassion” (Mittermaier 2014:518) and “encounters between privilege and poverty” (Muehlebach 2013:300; see also Mindry 2001; Redfield & Bornstein 2010).

In contrast to the growing literature on voluntarism in the global North, we know much less about voluntary labor and volunteerism as a mode of political and social action in African countries, even though African governments promote voluntarism among their nationals and volunteerism has an extensive colonial and postcolonial history on the continent. Some recent research explores voluntary labor within development, global health, and humanitarian interventions (e.g., Brown 2013; Kaler & Watkins 2001; Prince 2013; Redfield 2012; Swidler & Watkins 2009), yet there has been little attempt to approach the broader political, social, and economic meanings of voluntary action. Studies of voluntary action undertaken by African citizens are largely subsumed within critical studies of neoliberal development (e.g., Boeston & Cleaver 2011; Maes 2012). While the histories of voluntaristic action in East Africa have received more sustained attention (e.g., Aubrey 1997; Hill 1991; Thomas 1987; Wipper 1975), there is no comparative examination of the political and social purchase of voluntary labor within African societies; the tensions and contradictions surrounding volunteer practices as they take shape within particular social, economic, and political contexts; or the ways in which the rich history of volunteerism in Africa informs contemporary practice.

An examination of the multiple meanings and practices, the political, social, and economic context of voluntary labor, and the lives of volunteers in Africa is therefore both timely, in the face of growing global trends, and relevant, in the context of a regional studies agenda concerned with extending understandings of the changing constitution of labor, citizenship, and development in the region. This *ASR Focus* concentrates on two East African nations, Tanzania and Kenya. Recent years have seen an expansion of forms of volunteerism in these countries and a proliferation of associations that are related to the category of volunteering. The region experiences ever increasing flows of international and “gap year” volunteers who come to gain work experience, travel, and “make a difference” (see Simpson 2004). Meanwhile, large numbers of East African nationals seek out volunteer placements, particularly within the development sector, against a backdrop of high levels of unemployment and a growing gap between educational achievement and employment. Volunteering is attractive both to African nationals and to outsiders, and volunteers can be found in many organizations including hospitals, churches, schools, orphanages, youth centers, nongovernmental organizations, government health clinics, and research organizations, and in a range of development, environment, welfare, and health projects and interventions. The volunteer is a prominent figure in East African development, public health, scientific research, religious organizations, and society.

As the articles in this *ASR* Focus demonstrate, voluntary work is not a new phenomenon in East Africa. Colonial-era religious and charitable work circulated concepts and practices of volunteering, and late colonial governments in both Kenya and Tanganyika promoted “self-help” within rural development programs (Jennings 2009; Lal 2012; Lewis 2000). Postindependence governments drew upon these histories while infusing them with ideals of African socialism (Tanzania) or communitarianism (Kenya) in pushing volunteering as a means of “pulling together” (*harambee*), as a form of “self-reliance” (*kazi ya kujitolea*), and as a driver of national development (see, e.g., Maxon 1995; Thomas 1987; Widner 1992). While anticolonial struggles for emancipation drew upon voluntary action, volunteering has also been a tool of governance and control. Although volunteerism has been an important force for mobilizing people throughout postindependence history in this region, ideals of freely given labor and participation in development have been complicated by authoritarianism and coercion and an ambiguous *mélange* of patronage and patriotism (Burton & Jennings 2007; Hill 1991; Jennings 2003, 2009; Lal 2012).

In both Tanzania and Kenya, voluntary labor has been closely associated since colonial times with citizenship, the state, development, work, and the politics of identity. Yet volunteerism is politically powerful partly because it is a multivalent, slippery, and contradictory category. After independence, East African states oriented voluntary labor toward collective political aims and encouraged volunteers primarily as citizens contributing to the development of the nation-state. While voluntary labor remains highly charged morally and politically, and is still imagined as a gift of free labor to a larger collective and for a public good, the political and economic contexts in which it is promoted and practiced have changed. The contributors to this collection show that voluntary action has become a terrain of shifts and experiments in citizenship and governmentality, work, the labor market, and identity. Massive unemployment and faltering trajectories of social mobility in contemporary Africa render poorly remunerated voluntary labor attractive for those surviving within informal economies. In this context, voluntary labor has taken on meaning as a valued if unpaid form of work, conferring identity and social value, which is increasingly pursued as a form of “self-development.” At the same time, voluntary labor in East Africa, like elsewhere in the world, retains traces of earlier dreams and commitments. It continues to be animated by the desire to help others and create better futures, to “serve the community” and “develop the nation.”

The four articles in this *ASR* Focus bring together historical and ethnographic accounts of volunteering in Kenya and Tanzania. Although these two countries have marked differences in their political and economic history, during the independence era discourses of volunteerism were prominent both in socialist Tanzania and capitalist Kenya. These two countries have much in common in terms of their experiences of colonial governance, their struggles for independence, and their experiences of

development. We use the category of volunteering as a lens to explore relations between citizens and the state, the ways in which people engage with architectures of development assistance, the changing nature of work and employment, and the implications of these transformations for ideas about social identity, value, and belonging in the region. Studying motivations for volunteering and the attachments that people seek to establish through voluntary labor reveals their dreams and aspirations for the future and the kinds of society that they value and seek to be a part of.

The two historical and two ethnographic papers in this collection take up this challenge. Developing an appreciation of the complexity of forms by which people have employed and mobilized the category of voluntary labor, including articulations between “local” and “global” registers around volunteering, the articles underline the significance of volunteering in East Africa and point toward the importance of volunteering as an object of study that cuts across the fields of politics, economics, and development studies.

Volunteering work in East Africa entangles people in distanced relations and narratives of “doing good” that in some ways position them within the rise of volunteering as a “global” phenomenon (Jones 2008). However, the specific and locally salient forms through which the category of the volunteer is mobilized are of central importance for understanding the political traction of volunteering ideologies. As Emma Hunter’s article (43–61) argues, ideas about voluntary labor traveled and were produced in conversation across the colonial world, producing conflicts and contestation as well as a terrain of shared meanings and practices. Hunter draws attention to the development of a “shared discourse” between colonial officials and African subjects regarding the virtues of associational culture and voluntary labor, while Felicitas Becker’s article (111–133) highlights the incongruities, misunderstandings, and lack of fit of particular groups, particularly Muslims, within the colonial and postcolonial landscape of voluntary labor, citizenship, and development. Meanwhile, the articles by Ruth Prince (85–109) and by Hannah Brown and Maia Green (63–84) explore contradictions that emerge when volunteerism forms a moral discourse that makes assumptions (about altruism, for example) that do not necessarily accord with the historical, political, social, and economic contexts in which voluntary labor is enacted.

Citizenship, Development, and the State

Volunteer economies in East Africa have been shaped by the changing relationship between citizens and the state through late colonialism, early independence, and the postcolonial era, and the intense influence of “development” institutions and ideologies in the region. These issues are at the heart of the four contributions to this special section.

During the colonial era, forms of voluntary association such as ethnic organizations became significant sites of colonial resistance. One example

is the Kikuyu independent schools movement, which was a major site of resistance toward missionary education following the ban on cliteridectomy established by missionaries in Central Province. During the 1920s and 1930s, Kikuyu self-help organizations set up more than forty independent schools (Holmquist 1984; see also Thomas 2003). While colonial governments felt threatened by and often banned ethnic associations and other kinds of politicized voluntary association (see Odinga 1967), they at the same time heavily endorsed a form of community development that was profoundly reliant upon voluntaristic notions (see, e.g., Holmquist 1984; Jennings 2009; Lewis 2000). Such community development projects were viewed as a key tool toward anti-insurgency (see Ng'wethe, cited in Holmquist 1974:75). However, there was often a heavy element of authoritarianism in these forms of community development, and "voluntary" involvement frequently included forms of coercive labor (Hill 1991; Hunter, this issue).

Under the auspices of this broader community development agenda, voluntary labor and voluntary associations were viewed as key tools in developing modern African subjects and forms of gendered citizenship (and development). In colonial Kenya, women's voluntary associations, introduced by British colonial wives as a means of teaching African women skills of the modern Christian housewife, became very popular (Aubrey 1997; Lewis 2000; Wipper 1975), partly because they could be used as a stepping stone to local political power (Wipper 1978) and other forms of feminine status (Brown 2013). After independence, this gendered emphasis gave way to a more general focus on the value of voluntary labor in both contributing to national development and developing a sense of citizenship. The governments of President Julius Nyerere and President Jomo Kenyatta promoted voluntary labor as a particularly "African" form of cooperation and solidarity (even while authoritarianism and hierarchical relations suffused implementation and practice).

Emma Hunter's article in this issue explores in detail the colonial history of forms of volunteerism in Tanganyika, highlighting that this history was "closely intertwined with the state and with changing understandings of political community" (45). Hunter argues not only that understandings of the role of volunteerism as a means of enacting citizenship have shifted in interaction with the history of the state, but also that conceptions of volunteerism itself played an important role in the efforts of the colonial state "ideologically to remake the state and the role of the political subject within the state" (46). Hunter's article underlines the contested and contradictory notion of volunteerism, a point that is developed across this collection of articles. She shows how the colonial state in Tanzania worked with and promoted simultaneously two notions of voluntary work: as a form of virtuous, altruistic action which chimed with ideas of an ethic of service to the nation, and as a means of providing services that the state otherwise could not afford to provide (a formulation that became increasingly powerful after 1940). While these two formulations of volunteerism shared similar conceptualizations of duty, they were to some degree in tension with each

other. The use of voluntary labor as taxation from the poor served to undermine ideas of volunteering as a form of nation building linked to a political community of equal citizens. Hunter shows that when these two concepts became joined in the postindependence period, the result was “a fragile construction, and while it could serve as a powerful mode of articulating postcolonial citizenship, it could also reveal cleavages in society that some would have preferred to keep hidden” (45).

Hunter’s analysis shows how colonial statecraft and citizenship projects created the legacy for postcolonial understandings of volunteerism and the volunteer. The realm of the voluntary was already a broad and contested one in colonial Tanganyika, and these legacies had implications for the concept of voluntary work in the postcolonial state. In the postindependence periods in Kenya and Tanzania, volunteering has taken on a similar mediating relationship between the politics of citizenship and the state, but the constitution of volunteerism has become increasingly shaped by the architectures of development assistance. During the 1970s there was a growing focus on community participation in the health and development sectors, enshrined for example in the 1978 Alma Ata declaration. During the late 1980s and 1990s voluntary work became linked to the growth of the civil society agenda (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). Donors regarded states as corrupt, inefficient, and lacking legitimacy and saw NGOs and civil society organizations as more legitimate gatekeepers of development and as having a direct and more authentic link to local communities (e.g., Hearn 1998; Ndegwa 1994, 1996). Volunteering became a symbol of this legitimacy. It also became an important means for many people to position themselves in relation to the resources of the state and development organizations and to negotiate forms of local politics (Brown 2013).

As elsewhere in the world, volunteers in East Africa are nowadays filling in for services that in 1960s and 1970s were regarded as the responsibility of the state. However, since the early 2000s the state has again become more prominent in development agendas in East Africa through an increased focus upon issues of governance and accountability (e.g., Craig & Porter 2006; Harrison 2004). Promoted by organizations such as the World Bank and the W.H.O as integral to community-owned development, the work of volunteers has become an essential component of development interventions which are increasingly managed by forms of partnership between states and nongovernmental or foreign governmental agencies. While many of the affective and moralized associations around volunteering are still promoted in contemporary development projects—including the notions of community-owned, bottom-up inclusive development that were present in the 1980s and 1990s—there have been significant changes in the kinds of work that volunteers are expected to do and the kinds of people who find voluntary work attractive.

Hannah Brown and Maia Green consider this change in their article in this issue, drawing upon case studies of the involvement of volunteers in the rural civil society sector in Tanzania and the health sector in Kenya to describe

how volunteering has become increasingly professionalized. The predominately older women who previously volunteered for community-based development projects find themselves having to compete with younger, upwardly mobile people who seek to use volunteering as a means to gain professional experience and access to formal labor markets. Viewing these developments in historical context, Brown and Green underline a substantial shift away from the voluntaristic visions of *harambee* and *kazi ya kujikitolea* of the independence era and the decades after, when a person's qualification to become a volunteer was based solely upon community membership. As volunteers have been increasingly written into development architectures in a mediating position between development organizations and targeted communities, the work of volunteers has become progressively professionalized and has come to require more bureaucratic and administrative competencies. Volunteers are increasingly valued for their ability to mediate development relations and to situate themselves professionally in relation to the communities where development assistance is directed. In a context of high unemployment, volunteering has become linked to the acquisition of professional skills. In contrast to the egalitarian associations of the past, volunteering today has become a valued status symbol for the few.

Meanwhile, Ruth Prince suggests that voluntary labor and associated participation in development projects confers upon volunteers a form of public recognition and visibility to the state, as well as to powerful nonstate organizations, in a context in which citizenship rights and entitlements cannot be taken for granted (see also Chatterjee 2011; Mamdani 1996). Voluntary work has become meaningful as a form of association with, attachment to, and precarious incorporation into powerful state and nonstate institutions that dominate development and hold the keys to personal growth, social recognition, and developmental futures. Through volunteering, individuals navigate access to development resources and participation in development via a landscape of NGOs and civil society organizations as well as the state. In this form volunteering is no longer commensurate with citizenship as it was in an earlier period (even if this was replete with contradictions); it is more akin to neoliberal governance, with its emphasis on individual "responsibilization" (Rose 2000) as a means of demonstrating one's moral worth.

Work and Employment

Central to the notion of volunteer labor is that it is work that is freely given and for which payment is not received. However, this idea presupposes ideas of work and assumptions about the category of paid or salaried labor that do not necessarily hold fast across different cultural or economic contexts.

In East Africa, where formalized volunteering positions are often remunerated by small sums termed "stipends," "allowances," or "transport reimbursement," and where these small sums can be sufficient to scabble together

a precarious livelihood, the distinctions between voluntary and paid labor are perhaps particularly blurred. The contributions to this issue highlight that volunteers are motivated by many different factors: to give something to their community; to improve their status; to gain experience in the hope of future employment; and to earn a livelihood. Yet while volunteering opens up transformative trajectories for some people—as is the case in the global North, where volunteering has been linked to new forms of precarity (Muehlebach 2013; Perlin 2011)—so too in East Africa does volunteer labor appear to be emerging alongside novel forms of exclusion and inequality. This does not affect only the marginalized and poor. The popularity of volunteering among young educated East Africans points to a growing slippage between professionalism and precarity.

The categories of work, labor, and volunteering, then, are culturally and historically contingent. The forms that these categories take in East Africa shape the way in which it has been possible for voluntary labor to emerge in contradistinction to other forms of work. All of the articles in this collection explore the construction of volunteering as a concept and ideology, and the different ways in which voluntary work in Tanzania and Kenya is conceived as a category of productive labor in relation to the dominant categorizations of paid and unpaid work, employment, and labor. In the papers by Prince and by Brown and Green, voluntary labor appears to be positioned not in opposition to or as the inverse of salaried labor, but rather on the peripheries of the formal labor market. In East Africa, particularly in rural areas, salaried employment is a highly valued commodity, access to which is highly limited, and which is to a large extent based in the public sector and development organizations. Particularly in the public sector, paid work does not just offer the benefits of a salary, but also access to loans, preferential savings schemes, and social welfare such as funeral associations. The growing professionalization of volunteering and the formalization of volunteer labor within development organizations—a major and prestigious source of employment in much of rural East Africa—render volunteering opportunities especially attractive for unemployed people who seek work experience opportunities and connections to these powerful organizations. Moreover, in a context of high unemployment voluntary work can confer value and identity to those on the margins of the labor market.

The close association of work with labor is historically specific, however, and the particular way in which voluntary action is framed by dominant discourses of donor-led development has the effect of highlighting some modes of action while obscuring others. Felicitas Becker develops this point in her article in the issue. Describing the work of Muslim voluntary sector organizations in Tanzania, she shows that the category of volunteering frames work and labor in such a way that other kinds of work, which are very similar to volunteering, remain invisible and undervalued. Becker highlights the practices of Muslims who are involved in the exchange of various forms of labor based on different understandings about the

relationship between employment, salary, and professionalism. This taxonomy of work means that the work of these religious organizations is not visible as volunteering.

Becker relates this to the array of social and economic practices in which Muslim religious leaders and communities are involved, which rarely conform to modern division of formal/informal work, paid/unpaid labor. However, she also shows that some Muslim organizations, which are targeted by donor initiatives for participation in community development or HIV/AIDS work, are becoming adept at navigating this landscape, and that this development is causing further divisions and debates within the Muslim community in Tanzania. Becker's article therefore draws attention to framing practices that define some forms of work and some organizations as "voluntary" and others as not voluntary. Disagreements therein give insights into the different positions of Muslims and Christians in Tanzania regarding citizenship and political community, and associated access to development resources.

Participating in a Future? Identity, Attachment, and Civic Commitment

Volunteering is closely associated with the politics of identity. While during an earlier period this identity politics was tied to citizenship and belonging to a nation-state, such moorings have been loosened. Framed as a charitable rather than a political practice, volunteering today has become a "highly individual act" (Lacey & Ilcan 2006:38). The significance of volunteering to self-fashioning has been underlined in studies of global volunteering and gap-year volunteers (e.g., Smith & Laurie 2011). In East Africa today, volunteers often speak of their work as a means of "self-development" and as a way of creating new identities through orientations to new knowledge and skills and new social networks. Yet self-fashioning and the desire to occupy a valued identity coexist with a desire for public recognition and presence, and for a sense of participation in something collective and meaningful. Altruism and self-interest thus mingle as voluntary work becomes a way of pursuing personal growth (education, training, an economic livelihood, and future jobs) as well as a collective good.

In the present day however, as spaces of encompassment such as the nation or simply society are losing practical value as referents of citizenship (see Geissler et al. 2013), the issue of the collective good to which volunteerism is oriented has become more ambiguous. In East Africa, as elsewhere, the state's mediation of national futures, collective belonging, and economic progress, while never firmly established, has been considerably diluted by globalization and neoliberalism (see Mkwandawire 2001; Sassen 2006), and it must share space with an amorphous and shifting but powerful landscape of nongovernmental and transnational institutions (Gupta & Ferguson 2002). At the same time, the space of political intervention has telescoped to "the community" rather than a societal whole (Rose 2000), membership of which tends to be defined in terms of poverty or culture

rather than political citizenship. The space that volunteers must act on, then, is one that is increasingly folded onto itself at the same time as it is connected with distant “global” spaces. While this global reach is attractive, it is also unstable and unreliable. Navigating these landscapes requires particular skills, which are harvested through volunteering.

While volunteering supposes the enactment or pursuit of a tie between individual and collective—a point we began with—the issue of which institutions may offer forms of belonging, attachment, and care today is ambiguous. Prince argues that volunteers in Kenya are not only seeking livelihood and careers amidst high unemployment and survival in informal economies. They also “seek incorporation” into both a form of work and associated social identity, and into a powerful institution that offers recognition as well as some kind of stability that reaches into the future. They pursue this, moreover, not only to secure a future for themselves, but also to be part of something larger. Volunteering taps into the desires of African citizens to contribute to civic collectives and participate in developmental futures. These desires are evoked and expressed in the enthusiasm with which many volunteers speak of their work, in spite of the lack of payment. This enthusiasm motivates our own enquiries into volunteerism as ideology and practice in East Africa.

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Notes

1. The *OED* defines as "voluntary" actions that are "performed or done of one's own free will, impulse or choice; not constrained, prompted or suggested by another." The volunteer is "one who voluntarily offers his services in any

capacity; one who of his own free will takes part in any enterprise.” Volunteering is construed as a moral act; the act of offering free help; an altruistic act, giving one’s labor, energies and time for a cause, a collective endeavor, a public good; a means of acting upon suffering, pursuing collective goals, a vision of a better world or more equal society.

2. Voluntarism has been mobilized by fascist governments (e.g., Italy in the 1930s [see Muehlebach 2012]) as well as by socialist, communist, and capitalist states.