



FACT SHEET # 1 – FINDINGS: VOLUNTEERING AMONG ABORIGINAL PEOPLES - WAYS OF ENCOURAGING VOLUNTEERISM

Background

The Native Women's Association of Canada worked for the Department of Human Resources Development Canada to expand knowledge on various aspects of volunteering among Aboriginal Peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) of Canada to build on existing knowledge by identifying broadly the understanding of, motivations for, and patterns of volunteering among Aboriginal Peoples as volunteers (with a focus on Aboriginal women). The project also aimed to identify innovative practices and methods of engaging Aboriginal Peoples as volunteers.

While Aboriginal Peoples have faced many barriers throughout history, they have always been able to make an outstanding contribution to Canadian society. In 2006, Aboriginal people in Canada - surpassed the one-million mark, reaching 1,172,790. Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population grew by 45%, compared with 8% for the non-Aboriginal population. The census counted 50,485 Inuit, 389,785 Métis and 698,025 First Nations people in 2006.¹

While Aboriginal Peoples account for 3.8% of the population,² very little information is available on the issue of Aboriginal volunteerism. This project aimed to contribute to the knowledge base for developing strategic policy options to support HRSDC's ability to improve participation and inclusion of all Canadians, to build stronger communities, by enhancing and sustaining volunteerism among Aboriginal Peoples in Canada.

Defining Volunteerism

Volunteerism is an inherent part of Aboriginal cultures and is not perceived as volunteerism but rather as "helping out." The findings of our research indicate that Aboriginal people have strong cultural traditions of sharing, helping and caring for each other without expectations of payment. There are many distinctions to Aboriginal Peoples such as the higher rates of participation of women, youth and Elders. Also, women and men still occupy very gender distinctive volunteer roles.

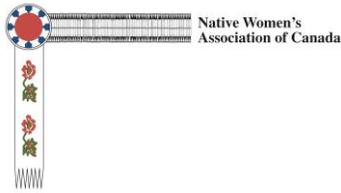
Informal vs. Formal Volunteering

There also exists a strong distinction between formal and informal volunteerism in the Aboriginal volunteerism patterns. Informal volunteerism is more frequent in Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal volunteers tend to volunteer within their community, by performing any task that is required. Aboriginal Peoples rarely go through formal channels to volunteer in their communities.

Since many Aboriginal Peoples who participate in activities that would otherwise be described as volunteer work, did not want to relate their work as volunteerism, this had to be clarified with participants by listing possible activities that could be described as acts of volunteerism to establish that almost all participants did act as volunteers or worked with many others who volunteered within the Aboriginal community.

1 2006 Census of Canada

2 2006 Census of Canada, Release no. 5: January 15, 2008



Once cultural aspects are taken into account, traditional protocols are recognized and relationships are built between the Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal communities, volunteering can serve as a mechanism to build mutual respect and social cohesion between Canada's Aboriginal Peoples and non-Aboriginal populations.

Gender Differences

Participants stated that men and women hold the same understanding of what volunteering means: it is 'unpaid work' that a person gives to their place of work or community. They further spoke about the cultural teaching of taking care of children and Elders within the Aboriginal communities, and being of service to them. However, more women than men were noted as being the primary people who do voluntary acts, particularly as they relate to care-giving, within the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities.

The activities that are done by men and women are also said to be very different. Women tend to take care of the organizational and social components such as cooking, decorating, organizing, and cleaning whereas men tend to take care of the more physical activities responding when manpower or heavy labour is needed such as landscaping, putting things away in storage, help with building upkeep, etc. Volunteer roles are still very gender specific.

Age Differences

Youth volunteers were also said to be more likely to volunteer if they would benefit from the opportunity. For example, youth volunteers are motivated by incentives such as learning skills that will be useful in the job market. The research revealed that youth volunteers need to be specifically asked or requested to volunteer. Young volunteers are less likely to take the initiative on their own. This might be because younger people do not share the same traditional values as older Aboriginal individuals. People who don't volunteer in their youth and later do as seniors may not see this activity as "volunteering" but as "just helping out."

Several senior participants spoke about contributing by: donating baked goods or cooking at community events, helping to organize social events to get other seniors out to socialize such as bingos for those who are older within their communities, and in urban centres. Elders also volunteer by contributing their time to teach youth their traditional teachings and language, even when they do not receive any money for donating their skills and much of their time.

It is worth noting that some volunteers from non-Aboriginal communities who have a connection with the church or religion have a sense of duty to volunteer, which is similar to Aboriginal Peoples in that they both believe in helping others to be of service to a Higher Power whether it be named God or Creator. This same notion was also reiterated to us by those participants who work with both Aboriginal groups and religious based groups. When volunteering was seen as being of service to the Creator, or as positively impacting on other people's lives, including by being a role model to others, the notion of volunteering was more meaningful to members of the Aboriginal community.

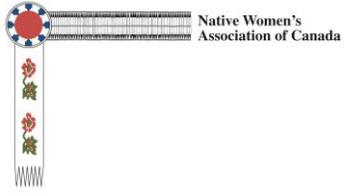
Engaging Aboriginal Volunteers

Best practices for engaging volunteers include: linking volunteerism with the notion of "helping out" as understood in Aboriginal culture; targeting recruitment by initially recruiting previous volunteers so that they can in turn recruit new volunteers from their community;³ using simple and clear recruitment processes so it's not complicated for people to get involved as volunteers; and building and maintaining a good reputation and relations with Aboriginal communities so as to continue to engage potential Aboriginal volunteers.⁴ By securing funding, volunteer organizations can find solutions to any funding issues that create barriers to Aboriginal volunteer participation, which can hinder recruitment efforts made by the organization. Also, having Aboriginal staff within organizations can increase the representation of Aboriginal volunteers.

The project revealed that there is usually little recognition or show of appreciation for informal volunteering in Aboriginal communities, as opposed to serving on a board or a committee where volunteers are appreciated via

³ McKague, Hoerber, Dorsch, Riemer, University of Regina, & Kryzanowski, 2007

⁴ Volunteering Australia, 2007



honoraria, gifts, training or whatever is affordable. Urban communities are also often divided along social and cultural ties. Urban Aboriginal volunteers tend to be from the Aboriginal educated and employed class. This situation is distinct from the on-reserve volunteers who can sometimes be individuals that are unemployed or retired.