A significant component of unpaid work

In 2013, the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians recognized volunteering as an official form of work and called for its regular measurement alongside employment and other forms of work.¹ This brings the definition of work into alignment with the 2008 System of National Accounts, which recognizes the contribution of volunteering to the economy.

Yet most countries lack reliable systems to measure volunteer work, and what data do exist are not comparable. As a result, volunteer work remains under-valued and its potentials under-realized, leaving volunteers, volunteer managers, policy-makers, government officials, and business leaders without the crucial information they need to effectively support this crucial renewable resource for societal problem solving.

New Measurement Standards for Statistics Agencies

The International Labour Organization’s new ILO Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work² represents the first-ever internationally sanctioned approach for gathering official data on the amount, character, and contributions of volunteers. National governments now have the information needed to measure volunteering according to the same level of standards used to measure other forms of work.

Approach and Variables

The ILO Manual advises countries to add a short survey module to their existing labour force or other household surveys to answer questions such as these:

→ How many people volunteer? What are their demographic characteristics?
→ What type of work do volunteers perform?
→ How much time do volunteers contribute?
→ What portion of this time is provided directly to individuals and what portion is provided through organizations (e.g., nonprofits, business, government)?
→ In what fields is volunteer effort focused (e.g., health, education, social services, environmental causes, legal services)?
→ How does volunteering in your country compare to that in other countries along all these dimensions?

Next Steps

Several countries have already adopted this Manual. We hope your country will agree to take this step. The Volunteer Measurement Project has been formed to promote and support such implementation and to compile comparative reports that will put the data to use. Contact volunteermeasurement@jhu.edu to learn how you can help bring this project to your country.

The ILO Manual

Definition of Volunteer Work

“Unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organization or directly for others outside their own household or related family members.

Benefits of the ILO Manual

Comparable. A common approach to data collection, definitions, key concepts, classification, and variables.

Feasible. Workable in the widest possible range of countries, minimal burden to implement, and sensitive to cultural traditions and differences in languages.

Cost-effective. Utilizes existing household surveys, reducing costs and taking advantage of existing classification systems and structures.

Efficient. Maximizes the information gathered with the minimum number of questions.

Reliable. Based on extensive input from an international Technical Experts Group, and careful field testing of key terms and design decisions.

Comprehensive. It will bring into view a sizeable part of the actual labour force that is currently invisible, clarifying the economic impact of these unpaid workers and helping policy-makers understand their great potential.

For more information, please visit ccss.jhu.edu or email volunteermeasurement@jhu.edu.

¹ 19th ICLS Resolution I: concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization.
² Produced by the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies in cooperation with the ILO and an International Technical Experts Group.
Volunteering is very inspiring and is important for community development, but is it relevant to statistical data-gathering?

In 2013, the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians recognized volunteer work as an official form of work and called for its regular measurement alongside employment and other forms of work. This brings the definition of work into alignment with the 2008 System of National Accounts, which places most volunteer work within the production boundary of the economy.

While a significant amount of data has been gathered on volunteer work in some countries, there has been no common definition, methodology or approach. As a result, findings are inconsistent, no systematic comparisons are possible either across countries or over time, and opportunities to assess approaches to volunteer management are being lost. Current labour force statistics are overlooking an enormous amount of unpaid work being done. It is crucial to make your labour statistics complete.

Volunteering in our country is unique. How can it be measured the same way it is measured elsewhere?

The ILO Manual was developed in cooperation with an international Technical Experts Group and specifically designed to be workable in the widest possible range of countries. Countries as diverse as Brazil, Norway, South Africa, Portugal, Italy, Bangladesh, and Poland have already agreed to adopt it.

We can’t afford to add more surveys at this time.

The ILO Manual does not require a new survey. It utilizes your existing labour force or other household surveys and existing classification systems, and is fully harmonized with ILO and SNA standards for measurement.

Even if we wanted to measure volunteering, we couldn’t include all of the questions the Manual recommends.

The ILO Manual is very efficient. It maximizes the information gathered with the minimum number of questions. Field tests suggest that most respondents will cite only one or two volunteer activities, reducing the time required for the ILO Manual’s implementation.

What kind of technical assistance is available?

The authors of the ILO Manual are committed to helping answer questions you may have. Additionally, local volunteering groups and other nonprofit organizations can partner to translate materials, test the survey module, classify data, prepare draft reports, and disseminate the findings.

For more information, please visit ccss.jhu.edu or email volunteermeasurement@jhu.edu.