

ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

What volunteering is not!

I suppose December is best known as 'the month of volunteering'.

Through a number of fund raising events organised during this last part of the year we are invited to remember the exponential contribution that this sector plays in our society, economically speaking a sector that probably contributes millions if one had to quantify the 'working hours' and all the resources dedicated by the social operator's contributions. Whilst collecting funds has its importance, what matters most is that during the fund raising events a thorough understanding of the cause is made known.

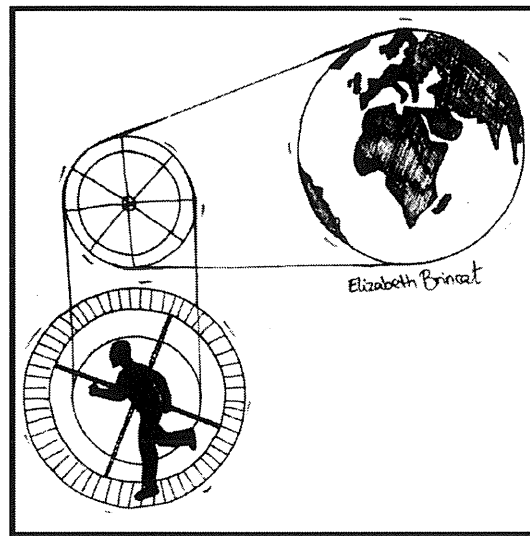
Even though I would hope that one day there will be no need for fund raising, I do understand that there are immediate circumstances that require a great deal of resources and that either because of bureaucracy or for some other financial or administrative reason that service might not be obtainable. A typical example is the one that the President of Malta Marie Louise Coleiro Preca speaks often about, namely the provision of some of the chemotherapy treatment that is not being offered within our National Health Services. But if truth be told, we shouldn't be having such circumstances to deal with. In an ideal World all the needs of all the people should be catered for all of the time. But until we come to live in that idyllic World we still need to contribute to each other's well being.

But what is more important than generating funds is that of engendering generosity.

I believe that most of us would agree that volunteering remains a fundamental pillar of our social composition, character and temperament. It is part and parcel of our welfare tapestry. Volunteering ensures that the State provides services and complements the work of the NGOs and voluntary organisations to ensure that 'populations' left by the way side are given the opportunity to get back on track. I wonder what would happen to so many people if volunteering would stop. For example, what would be the upshot on the hundreds of children that benefit from support in their homes or institutions, the aged and the attention and care they are given, the patients and their families in hospice or undergoing cancer treatment? This could be an endless list.

It is sad indeed that we are not reminded often enough about this dire reality and the crucial role that volunteers have in the well-being of society and more often than not we take this resource for granted.

I feel that it is important that



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people engaged in volunteering are not overly focused on stroking their egos. If volunteers are alienated into believing that they are the solution to the problem, the crisis will not go away, because the focus should be on emancipating our communities first and foremost.

On another note I believe that never like today has our voluntary sector been under so much threat.

I do appreciate that the State is dedicating so many resources to this sector, that there is a Minister focused on supporting volunteering and that we are managing to tap millions of Euros by the European Union, but this might also call for dependency and over-reliance.

If this sector is not vigilant it will be taken over by the European Union and the State's agenda, rather than by what the grassroots need most. Collaboration is of the essence but partnership doesn't mean that the funding partners are given the right to determine this agenda.

In fact I believe that some NGOs might have been hijacked by the State and are not delivering autonomously. Let's face it some have lost their soul to the attractiveness of permanence and stability.

I do understand that NGOs are a cheaper option than if the State had to operate the same services. I don't really have a problem with this because it is definitely more cost effective in terms of providing the same services. What dampens my vision is that at one point the State starts using NGOs and controlling their operations under the pretext that funding might be interrupted or

lessened.

This issue of funds is also tied to another issue. Whilst I do understand that we cannot do it all gratis, volunteering is about providing a service for free and we really need to work hard at ensuring that we are providing a service that is gratuitous because it ensures that there are no interests involved, that we are free to give it a go and that there is a level of spontaneity and initiative.

Another concern that rings an alarm bell is that it is worrying to see that the State ends up using volunteering as a form of social surveillance, controlling the people and eventually retaining a hold on the sector.

Volunteering is not about coveting as much money as they can but about giving service, about pointing out the lacunae in the system, about activism and direct action, about giving a voice to those who are being ostracized and discriminated.

Volunteering, as described by Professor Kenneth Wain in the study I had conducted, 'The Maltese Young People in the Voluntary Sector', is a social good and we need to retain it as such. 'Good' is not about just about being virtuous, but about representing the positives that lie in every one of us.

Volunteering makes sense in my eyes because it is spontaneous, unprompted and only marginally organized with a fluidity and flexibility for people to come in and come out of it as they please.

What we need to do as a society is to provide for the social space, to give the opportunity to people young and old, minorities or not to come together and work towards a cause that interests

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them. For example the law on Social Enterprise piloted by Justyne Caruana in collaboration with Minister Cardona is one mechanism that will ensure that the State supports without being overly invasive.

Voluntarism is an important concept but we need to make sure that we are helping and not creating a culture of helplessness, showing solidarity and not belittling others, participating in the design of communities and not creating competition. Whilst I do appreciate that voluntarism is also about complementing Government's welfare responsibilities we need to be very careful 'we' sleep in separate beds because voluntarism is to remain watchful against the grain of community deterioration.

So we need to do away with the kitty mentality and generate community, encourage cohesion, create a level playing field, propose ways to hearten social inclusion, find multiple funding partners, explore methods how to generate funds to get away from financial dependency.

Voluntarism is effective if it generates a social conscious, resists injustices, provides empowering mechanisms, facilitates civil society, increases incentives, offers opportunity for social access and gives a sense of control over 'one's' life.

“Ghandi xi Nghid”

by Ghandi xi Nghid MALTA and Ghandi xi Nghid

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