

## Senior Volunteering in the Context of Active Ageing

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with active ageing and presents results from a research study realized on the topic of senior volunteering. The author presents findings and conclusions from qualitative data, which was collected from coordinators working with volunteers in various non-profit organizations across Slovak republic and from senior volunteers themselves. The main research design was the grounded theory approach. Semi-standardized interviews and various other textual data sources served as the backbone of the analytical part. The qualitative part of the research was complemented with non-parametric exact statistical procedures. The main goal of the study was to identify the motives for volunteering of the elderly, investigate various factors connected with this phenomenon and to improve the ways NGO's can approach this population. The findings support the thesis that volunteering in a higher age can improve the individual life of seniors, although many barriers and obstacles were identified too.

**Key words:** Population ageing • Volunteering • Senior • Motivation • Barriers • Social capital

### INTRODUCTION

Europe today is facing major economic problems because of its aging population and a decreasing number of the working population. The demographic aging of population can be also considered a social problem and its consequences will soon have a significant impact on various areas of life - work, education, health etc. It is believed that population ageing will place substantial additional pressure on publicly-funded health, long-term and income support programs for older people [1]. Population ageing is an inevitable effect of so-called demographic revolution, in which there has been a shift from extensive to intensive demographic reproductions, characterized by low birth and death rates respectively. The term demographic revolution (demographic transition) was introduced by the French demographer Alfred Landry in 1934 [2]. The transition is characterized by a shift from low fertility and rising death rates among the elderly, leading to further population aging and eventual population decline, assuming no net migration [3]. Unlike the first demographic and low death rates to one of low transition—from high fertility and high death to low fertility and low death rates—which provides

a period of “demographic dividend” [4], the second transition, is also characterized by a “demographic tax”. Negative macroeconomic impacts can be cited as one example of this phenomenon's results.

The term population ageing describes the changes in the age structure, due to the increasing proportion of elderly in the population [5]. The elderly population is usually defined by the age limit of 65 years. In Western Europe this threshold usually coincides with the official retirement age. In Eastern Europe it may be replaced by the age of 60 years. Such defined elderly population is not internally homogeneous in terms of lifestyle or health and thus in terms of their attitudes towards society. For this reason, it is commonly subdivided. The age group 65-74 is called the „third age“ (young-old), persons aged 75 +, fourth age“ (old-old). The term oldest old represents the population of 85 + year olds. To reflect population ageing various indexes can be used in addition to simple percentages of selected population groups by age (0-14 (%) 60 + (%) 65 + (%) 70 + (%) 80 + (%)). Among these the so-called Ageing index is probably the most used one. It expresses the number of people in the post-working age to those in pre-productive age and is usually expressed as a percentage [6].

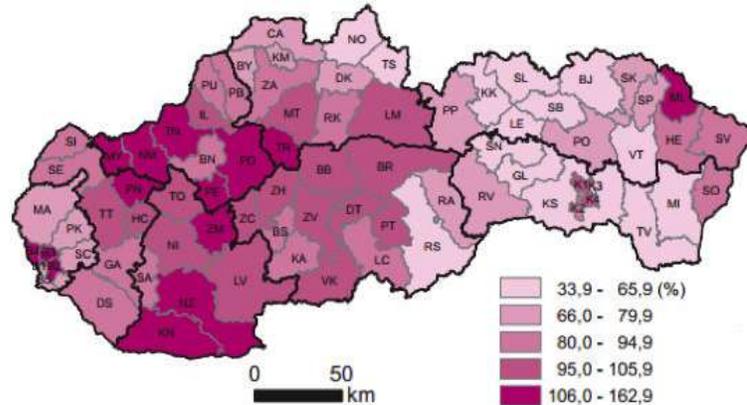


Fig. 1: Ageing Index in the Slovak Republic  
Source: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic

There is a high probability that in the future third of the population in various regions of the European Union will be older than 60 years. At present, the proportion of the population is about 20 percent [7]. Also the emergence of aging seniors is anticipated. Today, the proportion of people aged over 80 in the population is about 4 percent. By 2040, this percentage is likely to double. Since the mid-60s significant changes occur in the CoE member states in all major components of population development, lifestyle and layout of people's lives [8]. To a greater or lesser extent, this development takes place also in other European countries.

The value of the ageing index (Figure 1) for the Slovak Republic in comparison with other European countries is still relatively low (83,0 for 2011 according to the Statistical Office of SR). Slovak Republic is now one of the youngest countries in Europe. But the changing demographic behavior over the last ten to fifteen years has caused an acceleration of demographic aging. According to the latest forecasts, Slovak Republic, maintaining the current level of fertility (or with its slight increase) happens to be, one of the oldest populations in the world in the mid 21st century. The average age and the ageing index record a long-term growth, which is gradually accelerating. The current values of the average age and the ageing index in Slovak Republic are historically high [9]. As in other EU countries, we can record a gradual ageing population of seniors. The European Commission estimates that in 2060 the population of 65+ will represent more than a third of the whole population (36,1 %). This will make Slovak Republic the second oldest EU member state after Poland (36,2 %) [10].

Ageing is generally understood as a complex process that includes biological, psychological and social ageing

[11]. Therefore ageing as a social construct perceives the process of adopting new statuses and roles within the transition from paid employment to retirement. Prolonging the life of the individual must be accompanied by opportunities for health, safety and participation in various activities. World Health Organization has adopted the term "active ageing". It is defined as the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age. It applies to both individuals and population groups [12]. One of the ways to support active ageing is elderly volunteering.

For many older people volunteering plays an important role in the transition process. Attention is put to the contribution of volunteering in helping to fill the void sometimes felt upon retirement.

Senior volunteers can be classified into three groups:

- lifelong volunteers - those who volunteer because they have always done so,
- serial volunteers - those who have come back to volunteering later in life following a break for work and family responsibilities,
- trigger volunteers - those who are inspired by retirement to volunteer for the first time [13].

Seniors who had been active in volunteering throughout their lives usually draw attention to what can perhaps best be described as the existence of an ethical legacy, informed both by religious and humanistic impulses and a strong history of family commitment to volunteering and service. Older people stress the values their parents had implanted – the importance of lending a hand, helping others and joining organizations – which

they see as being fundamental in influencing them in their decision to volunteer. Many authors also point to a link between volunteering and geographic place in that many of the volunteers lived in or near the area they were born [14], or had been in their present neighborhood for many years and had built up extensive social networks based on social capital. According to Robert Putnam social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them [15].

Motivation of volunteers can be investigated simply based on the reasons that volunteers themselves indicate as important. For a placement in a more general framework, however, authors developed several theoretical constructs. In the international literature, the motivation of older people to volunteer is simply categorized as resulting from personal and altruistic motives.

**Personal Motives Include:**

- Filling the gaps in life - managing the transition from paid employment to retirement, coping with painful loss, adaptation to departure of children from home,
- Doing something that is fun and interesting,
- Enhancing personal development, learning new skills,
- Maintaining active and involved [16],
- Feeling that one is useful and valuable,
- Using the skills that person during the work (paid and unpaid) gained,
- Getting to know new people and make new friends,
- Structuring leisure time of the individual [14].

**Altruistic Motives Include:**

- Assistance to other [14],
- Returning something back to society [17],
- Meeting the needs of older people with whom they share opinions.

These characteristics can be described as two-factor model of motivation and have been applied in many researches on motivation for volunteering in the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [18]. Fitch (1987) introduced the expansion of this model of personal and altruistic motives, adding the social context. This can be described as the three-factor model of motivation for volunteering [19].

Multi-factor model is based on a functional analysis of motivation. This was applied on volunteering and has been linked with the reasons and causes, plans and objectives that determine and generate psychological phenomena, i.e. personal and social functions held by thoughts, feelings and actions of individuals [20]. From empirical research, Clary *et al.* identified six major functions of motivation for volunteering. Based on these features they created a range of incentives for volunteering (Table 1). This range has been tested on a wide variety of volunteer activities in a number of countries [21]. It is generally believed that understanding the motives of volunteering helps organizations to better manage their key resources and ensure fulfillment of specific needs for volunteering [22].

**Methodology:** The research project started in late 2009 and first partial outcomes were published in 2010 and 2012 [23, 24]. The research sample consisted of fifteen older volunteers and fifteen volunteer coordinators or representatives of non-profit organizations (NGO’s) working with volunteers. Among the older volunteers there were twelve women and three men, whom all have reached the retirement age, which is around sixty years of age in Slovak Republic (the age when a person is eligible to retire in Slovakia varies according to several conditions). The volunteers were located in the municipal district of Trnava, the coordinators were chosen from all-over the country. The sampling method used was snowball sampling and the method used for data collecting was a semi-standardized interview.

Table 1: Six functions of volunteerism

Function	Example
1. Values	The volunteer wishes to express or act upon important values like humanitarianism; "I volunteer because I concerned about those less fortunate than myself"; "I want to help others"
2. Understanding	The volunteer is seeking to learn more about the world or utilize skills; "I volunteer because I can learn more about the cause for which I am working"
3. Enhancement	Volunteer activities can promote psychological growth and development; "I volunteer because volunteering makes me feel better about myself"
4. Career	Volunteering has a goal to gain career-related experience; "I volunteer because I can make new contacts that might help my business or career"
5. Social	Volunteering facilitates strengthening of social relationships; "I volunteer because my friends volunteer"; "I volunteer because I want to make friends"
6. Protective	Volunteering to reduce negative feelings or address personal problems; "I volunteer because volunteering is a good escape from my own troubles"

Source: Clary *et al.*

This data were complemented with various other textual data sources, such as documents from the NGO's (formal and informal), electronic documents and e-mail conversations. The author acknowledges the limitations associated with the modest data collection and informal analysis. All the collected qualitative data were analyzed with Atlas.ti according to the open and axial coding processes of the grounded theory approach.

The general research questions were the following:

- What is the motivation for volunteering among older people?
- What motivational factors can be identified?
- What are the reasons for participating in voluntary activities?
- What barriers do elderly volunteers encounter?
- What is the connection between elderly volunteering and individual's health, community commitment, social capital etc.?

As an addition non-parametrical exact statistical tests were also performed to determine the possible influence of family, religion and geographical stability on senior volunteering. The software used for testing was IBM SPSS v.17 and the used test was Fishers exact test [25].

## RESULTS

Generally, all of the interviewed senior volunteers saw volunteering as a positive phenomenon, which of course is an understandable fact, since people working in this field were deliberately sought out. Rather interesting are the views on elderly volunteers from the perspective of representatives of various organizations that work with

volunteers. When discussing this issue they almost always expressed their feelings positively, as indicated by one of the interviewed participants: *"I definitely think, that senior citizens should volunteer (...) I mean, retired people, whether on early disability or retirement. This work should, in my opinion help them to improve the mental state (...) and physical condition."*

The positive effect of volunteering in later life (mostly psychological factors) further stressed another approached woman, who indicated that from her experience volunteering in old age helps to eliminate negative phenomena such as *"feelings of inferiority, uselessness or the fact called the empty nest syndrome"*. Another one said, when asked about the meaning of volunteering in higher age, that older people have volunteered to act as it would *"feel useful and many of them have invaluable experience that (...) may be of great benefit. There is also substantial demolition of barriers between the generations."* The interviewed people agreed on the fact that was very well formulated by one of the coordinators: *"Overall, it is important to promote volunteering at any age."*

The overall process of senior volunteering can be illustrated using the paradigm model according to the grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin [26] consisting of casual conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies and consequences, as seen in Figure 2.

It can be concluded, that a majority of the interviewed expressed their desire to help others and emphasized the care and compassion, which enable them to carry out volunteer activities. Volunteers saw this as a simple matter, which needs no further explanation. In the words of one of them: *"I just want to help. I do not want money"*.

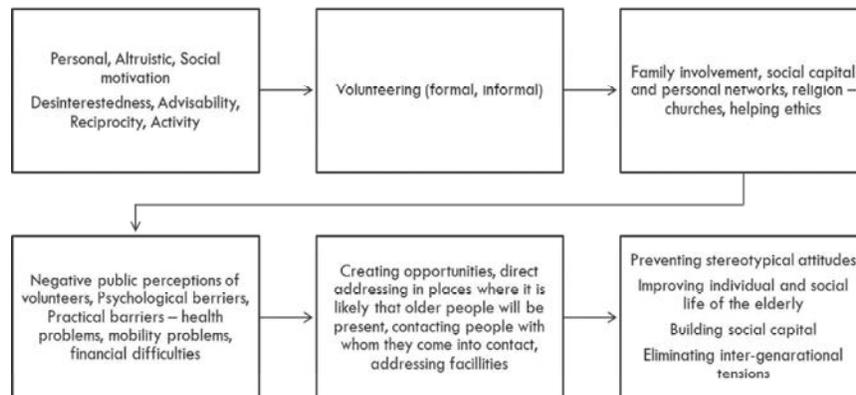


Fig. 2: Paradigm model of senior volunteering.

Source: Author

Table 2: Volunteer motivation factors

Identified motives	Three Factor model of motivation	Multi-factor model of motivation	Quote
Unselfishness	Personal	Values	"I just want to help. I do not want no money, I do not want any rewards, just help." "I just like to help others, not considering the fact why."
Advisability	Personal	Understanding	"If I go somewhere voluntarily, it's because I enjoy the job (...) It satisfies any needs that arise from the interest in this work." "I feel good, I satisfies me (volunteering)."
Reciprocity	Altruistic	Protective	"I want to return something at least in that form. I believe I can help someone this way at least."
Activity	Social	Protective	"I wanted any work that I did not just sit at home." "I am among other people."

Source: Author

Volunteering for many of the interviewed volunteers meant active, meaningful leisure time activity, where they can do a good job. One of them stated her motto: "*What I want to be done to me, I do to the others and what I do not want to be done do me I do not.*" In an interview with another has been said: "*If I go somewhere on a voluntary basis, it's because I enjoy the job (...) it satisfies any of my needs that arise from the interest in this work.*"

For some older people volunteering played a big role in the process of transition to retirement. In the debate on the needs for adapting to changed circumstances, the volunteers indicated that they were somehow forced to rearrange their lives to adapt to the new situation. They also reported a series of specific examples of how they can continue to contribute meaningfully in the form of volunteering, as this opportunity has been taken in the work environment.

In addition to the various mentioned facts, it is needed to be aware that many people are involved in voluntary activities because they were simply asked to do so. We can see all the factors summarized in Table 2, using the three-factor model of motivation [19] and multi-factor model [20].

In interviews, focus was put on the barriers that older people experience when trying to become volunteers. No cultural barriers were discovered in the sample. This does not however mean that these types of obstacles for volunteering do not exist in Slovak Republic. I met with the barriers that can be defined as "the perception of volunteers" and "practical barriers to volunteer activities".

The barriers in terms of negative public perceptions of volunteers can be illustrated on the following examples. One of the volunteers indicated how her activities are received in her immediate surroundings: "*The people in my environment think that only fools do this type of work*

*in this age.*" Another similarly argues that the problem is in: "*our people's minds. It is necessary to do some work in here. Mainly with the question: why do you do anything when you do not get any money for it?*" One coordinator stressed: "*Volunteering is generally understood as an activity for young people...*"

Psychological barriers are also important. We can illustrate the following example from an interview with a volunteer coordinator: "*My grandmother is 76 years old, she loves children and animals. She comes to us, still talking about how alone she feels. The usual stuff. She goes to a psychiatrist and tells her she has depressions. I tried to convince her to go to some orphanage or shelter. She claims that she does not hear or she does not have any energy. But she was babysitting the neighbor's children and was fully excited about it (...). Bad thing is that older people see obstacles in many cases.*"

In the research sample, I also met with the barriers that are described as practical barriers. These are mostly related to health problems and mobility problems since there are morphological variations connected with ageing that cannot be prevented [27]. Also financial barriers can be included here as we can illustrate from an interview with a deputy of a non-profit organization working with volunteers: "*One experience: one older woman wanted to do any job, just so she can go out of home, but she wanted to have at least some of the travel and subsistence costs covered, but the majority of civil associations and non-profit organizations that need volunteers do not even have that much money (...), there should be some support from the state for these people*".

Many practical barriers relate to communication. "*As for the barriers, it might be necessary to work on some bulletin boards, informing these people where to go, where offers of voluntary work for elderly people are (...) they cannot know anything when they are sitting at*

home." *"We have young volunteers but it still would be nice to involve older people (...). We want to work on some database, the only problem is, it's just on the internet and many older people do not go to the net (...) there has to be any other way."*

I also focused on cooperation of elderly volunteers with volunteers in the working age, benefits of volunteering in later life and the problems that organizations may encounter in the process of involving older people as volunteers for their activities.

The experiences of the volunteers themselves and representatives of organizations focused on promoting inter-generational cooperation among the volunteers. Older volunteers positively evaluated their experience from working with other age groups, particularly children and youth. Examples include a project where older volunteers from met with children to work together during Christmas time. *"They met us with children in workshops. We prepared Christmas cards and tree decorations. I felt very well between them."* It is therefore possible to conclude that inter-generational face-to-face volunteering appears to have a strong positive impact and to be an appropriate stimulation to perform volunteer activities.

Another phenomena are the advantages of volunteering in old age. In the research sample, particular advantages of individual and social benefits for the community and organizations were identified. The impact of volunteering on the individual health the participants felt unable to assess, although it can be identified [28], for example formal volunteering may decrease the risk of depression in later life [29].

Individual benefits can include life-long skills and experiences of the seniors [16] that can be transmitted to future generations. A volunteer coordinator formulated a clear position: *"Older citizens, especially seniors, should operate in voluntary activities, because they have rich experience and they are useful for young people."* But the process of learning and enrichment also works reciprocally. According to another interviewed, the senior citizens *"... learn something new from other volunteers. I feel that a few years ago more work was done in various interest associations, which we now call volunteer centers and it was fine."*

Benefits for the organizations are clear. Older volunteers serve as the stock of social capital [3] and even sometimes appear to be a surprisingly vigorous in comparison to their younger colleagues. Example serves to illustrate the practice of respondents applied to the helpline. *"... but when I think about it, our supervisors are older volunteers. They have my admiration because*

*in the ten years of our helpline working they were always able to align their responsibilities so that they are always on duty as opposed to young volunteers, who still have responsibilities with the school. (...) So, older volunteers have in my opinion better endurance and beliefs"*

Additional non-parametric exact statistical test were performed to determine if there is a possibility to observe significant relationships between volunteering being a dependent variable and family, religion and geographical stability as independent variables. Fisher's exact test can test only variables in a contingency table 2x2, therefore serial and trigger volunteers were merged into one category.

After testing significant relationships can be observed within religious background of the participants and volunteering ( $p=0,041$ ) and also family environment (parents or relatives were volunteers) and volunteering ( $p=0,01$ ). There were no signs of geographical stability connected to volunteering ( $p=0,315$ ). Since the number of participants was very small for statistical testing, these test can be considered only as a addition to the main research based on qualitative data.

## DISCUSSION

Most of the research participants were satisfied with their volunteering, which was widely considered as an opportunity to participate in something that is meaningful and fun on the one hand and less stressful than paid employment on the other. Volunteering can be seen as a way to keep the rhythm of life, such as the possibility of obtaining opportunities for lifelong learning as a way to productive aging. The participants - senior volunteers and representatives of non-governmental organizations promote the volunteering of the elderly, no negative statements that would copy stereotypes or ageistic attitudes have occurred in the individual cases. It can therefore be concluded, that volunteering of the elderly can be seen as an effective way to prevent such stereotypical attitudes. Volunteering thus eliminates the myth of the so-called "inactive senior".

For some seniors volunteering means a powerful way to develop abilities and skills already gained in professional life that fit well into the constellation of other activities. Volunteering is here a tool for gaining significant psychological and emotional satisfaction. Acquired new skills and abilities do not only enrich seniors themselves, but these pass their life experiences

and positive values to youngsters. This phenomenon is important for intergenerational harmony and solidarity between generations. Volunteering of the elderly may therefore be an important factor in the elimination of intergenerational tensions. If we will have older and younger volunteers working in organizations alongside, it is possible that not only the perception of older people in society will be changed and stereotypes will be broken, but also the values of older people which according to the irreversible demographic trends will gain a more significant influence will be easily understandable and acceptable by the younger generation. Volunteering could in this way help the elderly to a more positive perception in the society.

Volunteering is an important factor that stimulates positive quality of senior's life. Seniors who volunteer and representatives of NGO's have repeatedly reported that volunteering, according to their personal experience, can degrade such phenomena as inferiority complex, feeling useless, loneliness and depression. The role, that volunteering plays in the context of social work can be demonstrated here. It can be seen as a method or tool of social work in working with older people, to motivate them and improve their lives. It should therefore be offered and opportunities for the elderly should be created. Another problem that should be mentioned is the question if elderly volunteers should be treated differently than the younger ones [29]. Volunteering may depend from the cycle of life [17], but this thesis could be proved only with a longitudinal research study.

The presence of religion practiced in the past or in the present and the presence of "helping ethics" [13] were important factors in the background of many volunteers and their motivation, regardless of the type of volunteer work performed (also many volunteer activities were supported by the church in the local communities where the participants worked). The same finding applies to the family environment. This confirms the assumptions that see volunteering as an important value, and also as a stock of social capital.

I assume, that it is possible to claim that the family environment is a determinant of volunteering and provides an important basis for the development of positive perceptions of volunteering and supports its performance. But the family environment is not the only starting point of volunteering, it is important to go further and try to analyze relationships outside the family. Then we can say that it is the individual's social capital what creates social networks outside the family and helps to

overcome stereotypical attitudes towards seniors and the elderly as already described. If we try to summarize the findings based on these facts, we can conclude that family is fundamental for volunteering of the elderly, because it supports their activities, while allowing reciprocity especially in informal volunteering. Outside the family, then, it is a senior's social capital, network of relationships and interactions that creates room for further actions. The stronger these bonds are, the more consistent volunteer activities are performed and active aging can be achieved.

In the research sample I did not find any signs of geographic stability [14] being connected to volunteering. Several reasons might serve as an explanation for this phenomenon, the most likely seems to be that community involvement and strong social ties are common in Western countries (especially the U.S.) from a historical perspective and in post-communist countries this simply is not the case. The concept of citizenship in the countries oppressed by a totalitarian way of governance is always in the background, voluntary engagement in social and cultural associations is weak. The matter of public interest in the eyes of the general population is someone else - "the state", "the politicians" etc. - but not citizens themselves. There might exist a generally accepted notion that the laws are made to be broken, but there is also a permanent fear of state control present. People in such circumstances feel weak, exploited and unhappy. Such cultural patterns could persist in the lives of post-communist countries citizens. This theory is supported by the findings of my research sample on the public perception of volunteering. Elderly volunteers and representatives of non-profit organizations are constantly faced with a lack of understanding for their activities. They say that volunteering seen by the public as a kind of an inefficient activity. People have the idea that only activities that bring material benefits, or rewards, can be considered meaningful [30]. The involvement outside personal interests is thus low. However, the trend in a post-modern world is just the opposite, citizens should be involved in public interest. Social and political networks should be organized horizontally, not hierarchically. Thus, in these communities, the important task is to strengthen the civic solidarity, civic participation and integrity. In this context, volunteering is a fundamental phenomenon and its importance in the globalized society of the third millennium will only increase. Volunteering helps the civil society to eliminate negative phenomena at the individual and societal level.

Organizations working with volunteers felt the benefits of experience, dedication and capabilities of older people and their long-term service [31]. These factors can surpass the disadvantages of volunteering in later life. The problem seems to be the process of recruiting new senior volunteers. Therefore, the organization will need to develop new strategies to reach out to people who come from a background where the volunteering tradition did not exist. Organizations must be able to show seniors what they can offer.

Representatives of NGO's in my research sample had a problem with the way of addressing elderly volunteers. For younger volunteers TV, Internet and instant messaging are among the most effective sources of transferring socially significant information to the mass youth audience [32]. But in the elderly population, Internet as a contact method is not appropriate. Proven ways to search for older volunteers include [16]:

- Direct addressing in places where it is likely that older people will be present, such as surgeries, day centers, churches etc.
- Contacting people with whom they come into contact, such as social workers, caregivers, health care professionals,
- Addressing a facility where potential volunteers are already organized as pensioners clubs and other organizations.

## CONCLUSION

Population ageing is an inevitable process also for a relatively young („young“ from a demographic point of view) country like Slovak Republic. This process needs to be seen as a factor that may lead to the emergence of new social risks and crises. Their consequences will hit the hardest socially vulnerable groups of people, which the elderly population can be considered as a part of. One of the ways of eliminating these consequences is senior volunteering. It is necessary to understand the role played by volunteering in the lives of older people undergoing the transition from paid work to retirement. Volunteer organizations should try to maximize the benefits in broadening their base of recruitment to include those groups of older people currently under-represented as volunteers and to structure and organize volunteering opportunities so as to enhance the benefits for all stakeholder groups – the volunteers, organizations and wider community.

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