Volunteers, Voluntary Associations, and Development: an Introduction*

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Although not widely recognized because so seldom studied, there are a wide variety of voluntary associations and, more recently, volunteer programs in developing countries around the world. Some types may have been borrowed and adapted as forms and structures from other nations and cultures, often as a direct result of colonialism (see Gray, 1976; Lenkersdorf, 1976), but the associations and programs in lesser developed countries (LDCs) nonetheless have become parts of these nations' sociocultural systems. And in nearly every instance if not in all, there are unique indigenous voluntary associations in LDCs. Examples of the nature, variety, growth, change, functions, activities, and relations with other societal institutions of LDC voluntary associations can be found in such sources as Anderson (1964), Apte (1974), Banton (1957), Cheng (1950), Clement (1956), Douglas (1972), Drake (1972), Gray (1976), Hamer (1967), Keeny (1973), Kerri (1974), Kirby (1973), Kulp (1953), Lenkersdorf (1976), Little (1965), Manning (1973), Meillassoux (1968), Pederson (1973), Ross (1976), Smith (1974), and Worsley (1968).

For instance, Douglas (1972) found over 10,000 registered voluntary associations existed in Malaysia in 1969, including religious, social, youth, sports, benevolent (mutual benefit and service), guild, farmers, cultural, political, Chinese ancestry ethnic, and general associations. Drake (1972) estimated the existence of over 600 voluntary associations in the late 1960s in a Colombian city of about 250,000 population, including professional, civic and service, business and economic, social and recreational, educational and cultural, cooperative and community development, and political associations.

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as well as labor unions. And Banton (1957), Little (1965), and Gray (1976) portray a similar range of associations in African settings. Such studies, seen in the larger world context of voluntary associations in industrialized nations (Smith, 1974; Smith, 1975), make it clear that voluntary action is a worldwide phenomenon. Additional studies such as those of Anderson, (1971), Bradfield (1973), Ross (1976), and Webster (1968) make it further clear that voluntary associations also have been part of even preliterate societies, probably for at least 10,000 years, since the neolithic revolution.

The industrial revolution and sociocultural system development still play a major role in affecting both the nature and numbers of voluntary associations and volunteer programs in a country. On the average, LDCs have fewer of these voluntary groups per 1,000 population (Smith, 1973), a more limited range of types of groups, and a more limited percentage of the population involved (Smith, 1975; Smith 1974). But the causal relationships between voluntary groups and sociocultural system development are intertwined, both within particular nations and for the world system as a whole. Development in part causes greater numbers, prevalence and incidence rates, variety, and proportional participation in voluntary groups. But voluntary groups in part cause greater rates of and increase the absolute level of sociocultural system development. It is particularly the latter relationship that is of interest in this Special Issue.

Voluntary groups play roles in fostering development at many different system levels. For individuals, voluntary groups may have important effects in helping them to adjust to modernization and social change (Little, 1965), although such groups may also serve in themselves as modernizing influences comparable to the influences of formal education, the mass media, or factory work (Inkeles and Smith, 1974). The article by Thomson and Armer in this Special Issue directly addresses the nature of such effects, going beyond the prior research literature in important ways to show that the effects of voluntary groups on their members are likely to be different in nature according to both the nature of the groups involved (modern versus traditional) and the nature of the larger community context (modern versus traditional).

At a higher level of system reference, voluntary groups in LDCs may have important effects on developments as a direct or indirect result of their group activities. This is by no means a necessary consequence of LDC voluntary group activity, however. In some cases the nature of the LDC voluntary groups themselves militates against their effectiveness in fostering development, as the article in this Special Issue by Hunt shows. On the other hand, there are also clear examples of voluntary associations and volunteer programs indigenous to LDCs (whether adapted from other cultures or unique to the given culture) that seem to have a major positive impact on LDC development, as is shown by the articles in this Special Issue by Orora and Spiegel, Aldrich, and Fussell and Quarmony.