

Supporting and Recognizing Youth as Community Volunteers

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Youth and volunteering

Our research looks at youth involvement in recreation volunteering, including the constraints that prevent them from volunteering and their motivations to become involved and stay involved in volunteering.

Portrait of the young respondents

In the fall of 2004, 210 young people between the ages of 15 and 19 responded to a survey that included questions about what motivated them to become involved and continue volunteering. There were about the same number of boys (47.2%) and girls (52.8%) who responded.

The young respondents who had previously volunteered in a recreation context included 23.5% who had volunteered for an event, 19.1% for a recreation committee, 17.6% for a sport, 16.2% for a social activity, and 14.2% for an association.

For a majority of the youth (60.4%), the main volunteering activity they did was helping out. Others acted as group leaders or performed special tasks (21.6%). Some were members of an organizing committee (15.3%).

Portrait of the responding organizations

Of the leaders of organizations who responded to the questionnaire, 32.9% work in a municipality, 24.1% in an educational institution, and 38% in a nonprofit organization.

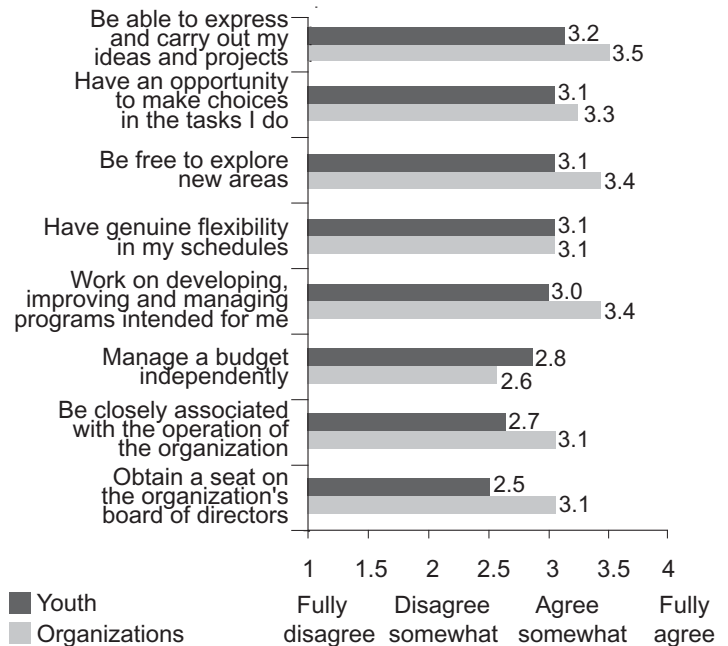
Of those who work in a nonprofit organization, 76.9% said they have previously welcomed young volunteers into their organization and 64% are currently doing so. However, youth volunteers account for a small proportion of all the volunteers for these organizations. Forty-three percent of the organizations explained that young people make up only 5% of all their volunteers.

Youth and organizations

It is through participation in the life of a school, an association, a neighbourhood, or a municipality that youth acquire the experience and confidence necessary for their present or future involvement in public life.

And because young people need a different kind of support, their integration into a volunteer setting requires openness and flexibility on the part of the organizations that receive them.

The needs and the place of youth in the governance of organizations



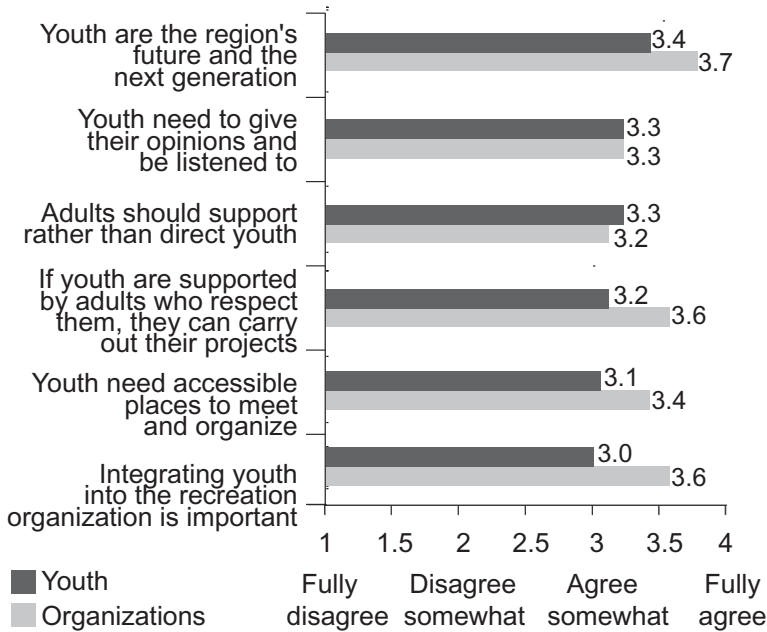
Our research findings show that young people are not seeking close association with the management of the organization in which they volunteer. They are not interested in managing a budget (ranked 2.8 out of 5) or sitting on the organization's board of directors (2.5).

The leaders of the organizations attach more importance to a seat on the organization's board of directors and collaborating in developing, improving, and managing programs for youth. The youth and the leaders of organizations do at least agree on the importance for youth to be able to express and carry out their ideas and projects.

The graph above shows that most statements are given a higher average by the leaders of organizations than by the youth. A number of hypotheses can explain the difference. The youth may wish to play roles that are not included in the statements proposed on the questionnaire. There may be a difference between the roles that the leaders of organizations identify with and the roles that youth want to play.

It is also possible that the youth have only a vague idea of the roles that they could play in recreation volunteering since volunteerism is not really of interest to them. These are all paths to be explored in future research projects.

The place of youth in the organization of volunteerism



It is clear that young people require support from the leaders of organizations in carrying out their projects. But, most importantly, they need room to express themselves and be listened to. Interestingly, the youth do not agree with the statement that they lack the knowledge and skills to become involved in organizations as volunteers. This statement was ranked last (out of 24) with an average of 1.9 out of 4. It is also interesting to note that the leaders of organizations attach more importance to the benefits of volunteering for the community as expressed in the following statement: "Volunteering in recreation helps youth develop a sense of belonging to their city and their school." This sentiment is less clear among the youth, who ranked that statement in eleventh place.

Recognition from a youth perspective

In response to the question "For you, what would represent real recognition of your volunteer activity?" the youth chose the following marks of recognition from a list of possible responses:

- Thanks from the organizers or directors
- Day-to-day respect
- Thanks from a participant in the activity
- Sufficient support and supervision.

It is clear that the youth do not necessarily want to receive a salary or some other privilege in return for their volunteer commitment. They just want to be thanked, respected, and supported.

Involvement of young volunteers in organizations

The leaders of organizations seem to recognize the importance of welcoming young volunteers into their organization and supporting them in their activities. However, they point to the difficulty of recruiting youth. This could be explained by the noticeable differences in what the youth and what the organizations believe are the proper issues to highlight in recruiting young volunteers.

According to the youth, the three main subjects that should be addressed in recruitment conversations are:

- the task requested
- the cause advocated by the organization
- the length of the commitment.

These results explain why youth are more involved in events and activities that require a spontaneous and occasional time investment.

Youth are the emerging volunteers for recreation volunteerism. Their recruitment can be part of the solution for volunteer burnout. It is therefore important to be open and to adapt our organizational structures to their reality.