

# Chapter 3

## How to Become a Volunteer?

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### Introduction

Chapter 2 discussed the characteristics and distribution of the volunteer population and solidarity activities in Mexico, based on an analysis of the National Survey on Solidarity and Volunteer Action (ENSAV, Spanish acronym). According to the findings of ENSAV, activities carried out by people through institutions and groups to help third parties represent 44% of the volunteer population. This implies that almost half of the population carrying out volunteering activities chooses to do so through organized groups. In addition, the ENSAV report also shows that 24% of all those participating in such an activity belong to some organized group. The percentage seems low, but corresponds with the results of other studies (Layton 2006).

Two aspects of the data that stand out call for attention (a) a significant percentage of the population carrying out volunteer or solidarity-type actions prefer to do so through organizations or institutions and (b) a fourth of the population performing these actions belongs to an organized group. Although the analysis of both aspects is relevant, we find that information about what goes on in a Mexican society is practically unavailable. In order to find out more about these aspects, the following three chapters analyze in depth what happens specifically with regard to people who belong to volunteer groups and actively participate in non-profit organizations (NPO) as a way to help others.

As a complement to the ENSAV, 15 case studies carried out in NPOs, with a total of 66 in-depth interviews, are analyzed in this chapter; the activities of volunteers are also explored in detail here. It might be mentioned that the ENSAV made it possible to develop a clear understanding of the nature of help for third parties and its different modalities in the national context. Simultaneously, the case studies will allow us to delve more deeply into an understanding of volunteers in Mexico, as well as the concerns and reasons they have for getting involved in activities to help third parties. Thus, we will have information about the behavior of the population

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over 18 years of age in Mexico with regard to acts of solidarity, and also the characteristics and paths followed by actors who, in a voluntary and organized fashion, perform actions to help others.

## **Background**

When dealing with the subject of volunteers and volunteerism, special emphasis has been placed on analyzing the nature of this non-profit sector and its relationship with the government, as well as exploring the types of services provided through these activities (Kramer 1990). These studies have contributed in a significant way to generating information about these matters. Other analyses have focused on characterizing the different types of volunteers based on their motivation levels (Cnaan et al. 1996). In certain other cases, consistent findings have been generated by means of surveys or investigation with focal groups, without looking deeply into the meanings or reasons that explain what is going on with the subject (Taylor 2005). Thus, a body of qualitative work that could provide extensive information about unpaid volunteer work and their impact on people's lives is not available (Taylor 2005).

In Mexico, the scenario poses an even greater challenge, since this is still a pending item in the research agenda. In this regard, at least the following questions need to be posed: Why do people dedicate time, effort, and knowledge to some causes? Who are the people who develop these kinds of activities? What reasons do they give for their involvement? How do they decide to join organized groups to participate in these kinds of activities? Why do some people participate individually? How do they come to have these kinds of concerns? Do their families, relatives, friends, or their own life experiences have some relation to participating in practices that may be considered beneficial for third parties? Do they expect something in exchange for what they do? The subject is complex; hence, it is necessary to develop a response to some of these questions, which will undoubtedly contribute to an understanding of volunteer activity and thus, the volunteers.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this chapter is to delve into the process through which people decide to get involved in volunteer groups, analyzing in depth the course of the subject's lives so as to identify the reasons that lead them to participate in NPOs and activities that entail, in different ways, support for third parties. This in effect implies expanding an analysis of the reflections of the volunteers themselves and of classifying differences among them so as to generate new research proposals on this subject in the case of Mexico.

In order to fulfill this purpose, I analyzed 66 interviews with a group of people who participated as volunteers with different organizations. They dedicated time

and knowledge to help third parties, who were not necessarily members of their family group, without receiving a salary or economic remuneration. I delve deeply into the meaning this kind of volunteer work has for them, the reasons why they volunteer, and the changes noted over a period of time. To be precise, the way in which the process of giving new meaning develops that allows them to continue with these activities.

I am interested in analyzing responses that may seem socially acceptable, such as “help for others,” and discussing the fact that such affirmations, and others mentioned in this text are the result of the life experiences of the subject, his or her individual trajectory, as well as the family environment in which he or she has lived.

The range of options for undertaking volunteer work includes very diverse activities, such as caring for sick people or people with diminished capabilities, attending to children who live in marginalized conditions and poverty, training others to provide education, promoting the integration of excluded groups, giving catechism courses, fostering sports or cultural activities, helping to improve the life conditions of marginalized groups, or encouraging a sense of community and integration in defense of specific causes, to mention a few.

I consider this to be an important matter since, as was noted in Chap. 2, a significant percentage of the population in Mexico is willing to undertake volunteer work. The percentages shown are relevant, given the fact that 66% of the population 18 years and older have carried out some type of volunteering activity or performed acts of solidarity in the course of their lives, and 44% of the total have done so through institutions or organized groups.

## **Analytical Methodology**

The investigation covered in this book includes conducting a survey based on a representative national sample,<sup>1</sup> as well as structuring, designing, and carrying out 15 case studies in order to gain a full understanding of the processes of giving meaning and eventually an even greater meaning, to the actions undertaken by people considered to be volunteers.

One of the purposes of the investigation was to try to understand the paths followed by people who participate in volunteer groups, as well as to explore the reasons that led them to participate in these kinds of practices. In order to do so, it was necessary to generate qualitative information obtained through in-depth interviews, and come to understand how the subjects began their process of becoming involved in the world of volunteerism. This is why we chose to work based on case studies, a methodological tool that is widely used for analyzing organizations, groups within organizations, or individual subjects. Through case studies, it is possible to analyze in a detailed way the perspective of the subjects involved in some specific activity, delving into questions such as why and how the subjects do what

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<sup>1</sup>The results have already been analyzed in Chap. 2.

they do in a given context, where it is possible to follow the processes involved in the phenomenon under study (Yin 1991; Meyer 2001). In addition, qualitative data provide us with a means to develop a description and a holistic understanding of the processes and activities, where it is assumed that the phenomenon under study and its complex system cannot be reduced to variables of causal relations having a linear character (Patton 1990).

For the purpose of developing and structuring the case studies,<sup>2</sup> one organization was considered. It was necessary to maintain contact with these kinds of non-profit entities, oriented towards different spheres of action,<sup>3</sup> where groups of volunteers participate. The organization was conceived as an entity in search of specific niches to offer its services that requires economic support for planning and development, and consisting of both paid and unpaid or volunteer personnel, as well as a set of social support networks. In order to analyze the subjects, the method of structuring their life histories was used, which is an analytical tool that makes it possible to examine the transitions experienced by individuals based on specific life experiences (Harris 1987). Analyzing the biography of a person brings us closer to the context in which social action takes place, not only in terms of the subject's experiences or specific conditions, but also as part of an effect of past actions in the context of present actions.

The organizations were selected based on three criteria: first, it was established that the organizations should be active in different spheres of action, based on the concerns they deal with. For this reason, documents were reviewed and some proposals were consulted (Dingle 2001; Brito Velásquez 1997). It was possible to define 12 spheres of action in which organizations were active in the case of Mexico (see Table 1, Chap. 1). The idea of including the greatest number of possible spheres of action prevailed, i.e., organizations with a diversity of purposes and niches to focus on. Secondly, the criterion was that all the organizations included should involve people acting as volunteers. Thirdly, the criterion was to include both formal (i.e., registered) organizations and informal ones, i.e., interest groups brought together by a common objective with several years of activity.

The characteristics of the organizations that would form part of the case studies were defined in accordance with the structural-operative criterion proposed by Salamon and Anheier (1996), that is to say: (1) that they had been in operation for several years; (2) that even the informal organizations had a minimal operational structure; (3) that they were active in one of the spheres of action considered; (4) that they offered support for third parties; (5) that their objective was not to

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<sup>2</sup>The research design established that both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis would be performed. However, the questions included in the ENSAV were designed by the person responsible for the area and the general coordinator for the project. The design, content, and the way of carrying out these case studies were defined by the author of this text as the person responsible for the qualitative area. They were also amply discussed with other members of the group and with the general coordinator, where an interest for improving the reliability and validity of this analysis prevailed.

<sup>3</sup>Chapter 5 details the characteristics and particularities of the organizations about which information was gathered.

generate a profit, i.e., non-profit organizations; (6) that they included a group of people who were engaged in volunteer activities for beneficiaries of the organization; and (7) that they were distributed in different regions of Mexico.

In order to facilitate access to the organizations, we received the assistance of the Tecnológico de Monterrey: their Social Education Administration provided us with an ample number of organizations with whom they maintained relationship, either because students had carried out or were carrying out their social service with them, or because the organizations themselves had contacted the institution to request advice. Twelve organizations were suggested from this list, and three other organizations in spheres of actions, in regions that had not been covered, since the concern was that the case studies include as many regions as possible.

A total of 15 case studies were completed, consisting of 66 in-depth interviews with an equal number of people. Although this was not a representative sample, it was possible to define some general tendencies concerning the life histories of the groups of volunteers, establish specific differences among them, and investigate more deeply into certain aspects. The case studies included 13 formally constituted organizations, an informal organization, and a person who carried out volunteer-type activities in an individual way. The reason for including these three different types of classification was that in Mexico these seem to be the generally characteristic for this kind of participation (Verduzco 2003). Verduzco's analysis of the ENSAV fully corroborates this decision.

I chose to generate information from three sources to design and structure the case studies: (1) documents prepared by the organizations themselves; (2) a period of participant observations; and (3) a series of in-depth interviews within the organization. In order to facilitate coordination among the field investigators, I prepared a manual detailing the technical aspects for participant observation and in-depth interviews. For the field observation phase, I designed a set of questions oriented towards gathering information about the organization, i.e., a detailed description of the type of activities carried out, how they organized their daily activities, and who their users were. The aim was also to get closer to the subjects normally participating in order to select the staff personnel and the volunteers that would be interviewed.

When designing the in-depth interviews, the objective was to reveal the different viewpoints of the subjects making up a NPO that is focused on providing services to third parties. I thought that four different kinds of people should be interviewed for each case study based on the general characteristics of any organization: the founder, the director and/or informal leader, a coordinator or staff member, and a volunteer. It might be mentioned that, in most cases, the organizations had a structure that corresponded to the requirements established. The types of subjects to be interviewed were defined as follows:

- *Director of the organization or informal leader, who has the responsibility of fulfilling the organization's aims:* the person who, at the time of the interview, was in this position or was recognized by the members as the leader. It is possible that, in the first case, the person may receive remuneration for his/her

activity. It is also possible that this person is the founder of the organization in some cases.

- *Founder, president, or volunteer advisor*: the person with the longest service in the organization or who founded it, and who participates directly in selecting a new leader. This person may or may not actively participate at the time of the interview.
- *Staff member*: a person with a specific post in the organization who directs and/or coordinates work in specific areas. It is possible that in some cases this person may be receiving pay.
- *Volunteer*: a person voluntarily participating in the organization without pay for the activity developed. This person is also designated as a volunteer by the organization itself.

Considering the types defined above, I planned to interview the director and/or informal leader; the founder, president and/or voluntary advisor; one or two staff; and two volunteers. In this way we could find out about the perspectives of different subjects working in the organization.

In order to carry out the in-depth interviews,<sup>4</sup> I drew up detailed guidelines for each kind of interview, since the case studies were planned as replicas, in accordance with Yin's proposal (1991). The interviews were designed based on themes and touched on both general and specific aspects of the history of the subjects when developing activities as volunteers. The areas covered were the same in all cases, with modifications only based on the position of the person interviewed in the organization's structure. The topics were designed in order to explore the subject's socio-demographic characteristics, family, education, and work; the subject's history in support activities for third parties; mobility within organizations or outside them in activities for third parties; the reasons for being involved in these activities, with a special emphasis on volunteers; as well as the expectations, motivations, influences, types of activities undertaken, characteristics, frequency, and events reinforcing the activity or leading to distancing.

In the case of founders, the reasons that led them to start the organization and the problems associated with that were looked into more deeply. With the directors, how complicated it was to work in a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting others was explored. In the case of staff and volunteers, more attention was paid to decision-making in the structure and daily work with volunteers.

In order to select the individuals to be interviewed, the criterion defined was that the candidates be representative in terms of experience and knowledge of the subject covered by the study. For this purpose, I had the information provided by the participant observation phase on members of the organization, which allowed me to identify ideal subjects for the interviews with greater precision. In the case of founders and directors, the people interviewed were simply the people who filled these positions. In the case of staff personnel or coordinators and volunteers, people were sought who had participated in these kinds of activities over several years and who were familiar with and knew about the organization.

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<sup>4</sup>See Appendix IV, Interview Guidelines.

The in-depth interviews lasted for about 45 min and in most cases two interviews were completed for each subject to cover whatever was missing or to go more deeply into specific subjects that needed to be clarified. At the time of the interview, the only people considered to be volunteers were those designated as such by the organization itself, even if there was information indicating that other people in the structure were also working as volunteers, as in fact was the case.

The set of 15 case studies consisted of a total of 66 in-depth interviews. In order to analyze the information gathered from these interviews, work was carried out on two fronts: on one hand, a classical-type manual review to answer specific questions about family history, reasons, etc., and, on the other hand, the use of the *NVivo* computer program, version 2.0. In the latter case, a series of structural conditions were established that made it possible to encounter some homogeneity in the information gathered. This was structured by means of sets of variables or attributes, and then codified based on the subjects' own enunciation context. The codification was done by means of "text search operators" and the *NVivo* program was used for this purpose. The text searches were also done with corresponding synonyms to achieve greater precision, based on an initial review of the content.

## Gathering Information and Teamwork

The field work, which included a phase of participant observation, collecting documents, and in-depth interviews, was done simultaneously in different organizations between December 2005 and April 2006, with the assumption that this would make it possible to have similar conditions in the different regions of Mexico. I also chose not to do interviews after April 2006, in order to avoid having political questions affect the concerns of the investigation, since the presidential elections in July had created an agitated climate that ended up in one of the most controversial elections that has occurred in the country. This made it necessary to train a team of interviewers to carry out the interviews simultaneously in the different regions of the country.

The first team was made up of a group of 12 professionals from different areas; all of these personnel were from different campuses of the Tecnológico de Monterrey. I trained the group of field investigators, since some of them did not have previous experience with participant observation and interviewing techniques. They also received a manual with exercises, as well as advice about their concerns prior to performing the field work.

During the information gathering phase, I maintained constant contact with the team. It should be mentioned that this process turned out to be particularly work-intensive and interesting, and thanks to the support from the *Blackboard* technological platform which the Tecnológico de Monterrey placed at the project's disposal, it was possible to maintain constant and simultaneous communication with all the members of the team. There was also a technical coordinator who participated throughout the process of recruiting the team and was involved in subsequent follow-up, as well as in finding solutions to possible problems that arose.

The second team consisted of two professionals, an anthropologist and a specialist in human development, to finish up the number of required case studies. Follow-up with this team was done independently, without interaction with the first group. They used the same materials and there was constant follow-up for gathering data, although without the technological communication platform. This allowed uniformity in the type of information possible.

## General Characteristics of Those Interviewed

Of all those interviewed, 74.2% (49) were committed volunteers. This means that they did not receive any pay for the activities they participated in, although some did receive support for transportation or meals when they went out to do some specific work for the organization. Another 25.8% were paid personnel, i.e., the remuneration received was pay for the work done<sup>5</sup> (see Table 3.1). In terms of the gender distribution, 74% (36) were women and 26% (13) were men; this gives us a 3:1 ratio in favor of the women. Thus, 75% of this group belonged to the 44% of the adult population in Mexico that participated in volunteer work and more specifically to the groups who carry out these activities every day (9%) or every other day (10%), according to the ENSAV.

As will be discussed below, this analysis is relevant for understanding the reasons given by those who participated in these kinds of activities, although they are not among the volunteers. The information gathered from the different organizations is grouped in Table 3.1, indicating the number of people interviewed, their gender, and if they were part of the paid personnel or were volunteers.

When analyzing the interviews, I found that volunteers were from all positions, such as the founder, the informal leader and/or director, as coordinators or simply as volunteers. That is to say, in the cases analyzed, the volunteers included both personnel strictly designated as volunteers as well as people who held other positions in the hierarchy of the organization.

In fact, 14.3% (7) of the total in groups of volunteers consisted of people who had been founders or advisors of the organization, and another 30% (15) were directors and/or informal leaders and coordinators. Finally, 55% (27) were volunteers, i.e., personnel who generally supported the coordinators, without having a specific position and function within the organizational structure.

Those making up the group of volunteers had a wide variety of occupations. In this category, 22.5% (11) were employees, 18.4% were business people and/or self-employed, 10.2% (5) were students, 6.1% peasants, and 6.1% worked full time in the organizations, while 4% were religious ministers. On the contrary, 32.7% (16) were housewives or retired. A higher percentage of people in this group were involved in for profit economic activity, in addition to participating in non-profit organizations.

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<sup>5</sup>Although the amount they received was not considered in some cases when explicitly indicated by those interviewed, as the amount was far below what they would have received if they worked for private enterprise.



**Table 3.1** Scope of volunteer actions by the organization and personnel interviewed

Sphere of volunteer action	Orientation of the organization	People remunerated	People not remunerated
Business	Aide to women in marginalized neighborhoods		4 W
Government institution	Dedicated to orphaned children	1 M 1 W	3 W
Religious	Values formed in the Catholic faith		5 W
Sports/recreation	Promoting sports among children in poorer neighborhoods	1 M 1 W	3 W
Youth/educational	Educational attention for youth in risk situations	2 W	1 M 1 W
Rural/community	Support for management of community development and labor counseling projects		3 M 1 W
Vulnerable groups	Attention to the disabled to facilitate social integration	2 W	1 M 1 W
Youth/educational	Help for abandoned and/or orphaned rural area youth	2 M	2 W
Health	Health care for women in extreme poverty	2 W	2 W 1 M
Causes	Attention for indigent sick people	1 W	4 W
Educational	Attention for street children	3 W	1 M 1 W
Cultural	Promoting and fostering culture	1 W	3 W
Individual	Contributing knowledge to improve installations		1 M
Vulnerable groups	Attention to working children in marginalized urban areas		5 W 1 M
Urban	Support for construction of housing in marginalized suburban areas		4 M 1 W

Source: Information from the case studies developed for this study

Although 75% of those interviewed were committed volunteers, when analyzing the information, I did not find significant differences in terms of their concerns and reasons for participating in these support groups between this group and those who were employees of the organizations. As a result we decided to analyze the sample as a whole. Some of the organizational employees participated in activities as volunteers in other places, and they themselves considered their participation in these NPOs as something very different from working for an institution in the government or private sectors. For the analysis in the following sections, we took the entire group of 66 subjects interviewed into consideration. The differences between the volunteers and the paid workers are only distinguished when the information gathered made such differences evident.

The majority of those involved in this activity were women, who represented 71% (47) of the total. This percentage differs from the results of the ENSAV, where 52% of those engaged in support activities were women and 48% were men. In terms of age groups, 44% of the total was between 30 and 49 years old, while 29%

were over 50, and only 2% were under 29 years old. This means that almost three-quarters of those interviewed were people in their productive stage. The ENSAV reports a similar distribution in this case. These findings place in doubt the generalized idea that the volunteers consist only of people who have free time which they fill, among other ways, by dedicating themselves to providing services to third parties, which is undoubtedly a subject which should be further explored. Perhaps this may be the case with women from more well-off sectors, but this was not the case with the ENSAV and the case studies.

In terms of the marital status of the people interviewed, 69% were married, 31% were single, and 67% of the total had children. This implies that those participating as volunteers combined their daily life and responsibilities with their family group, with a concern for contributing their personal time to third parties who required attention. We will return to this point later on, when we analyze the reasons expressed by the people interviewed. What stands out is that getting involved in volunteering demands a mature attitude toward life and the perception that others need support.

In terms of educational levels, 50% had obtained a university degree or some level of professional education, 18.2% had taken technical studies or finished high school, 12.1% had finished middle school and/or commercial schools, and 10.6% had done a graduate course. One person had a doctorate degree and only 9.1% finished elementary school or have only attended a few years. That is, a high percentage (60%) of the group consisted of people with high educational levels in comparison with the national average, which is 7.7 years. This means that the organizations amass a population with a high level of education in all cases. In fact, all of the founders and an important part of the directors and/or informal leaders had taken undergraduate or graduate studies.

This high educational level is attributed to the fact that in Mexico, multiple and difficult procedures are required to formally establish organizations that are not accessible to the entire population. In addition, procuring funds to finance the organizations and develop financially viable projects requires knowledge about various aspects. We can state that, in this case, we are dealing with a particular group in terms of its educational level, especially in comparison to the prevailing situation on a national level.

## **Background and Participation in Volunteer Activities**

When analyzing the histories of those interviewed in relation to activities related to volunteerism, I found that 84% of the total had participated in other organizations or their immediate family had done so in an informal way. In other cases, they carried out support activities on their own after joining some organization. However, for 16% of the group, this was the first time they were involved in these activities. An interesting point is that the group of people interviewed showed no change of organization; once they join one, they stay there for several years, even decades,

which imply a long-term commitment. For those who indicated that they had been in other organizations and had left them, this was generally due to moving to another city.

In terms of their experience in these activities, 24% had more than 10 years of experience of volunteerism. This group was mainly made up of founders, directors and/or informal leaders of the organizations, with a history of between one and three decades of having been involved in organizations to support specific communities. These are people with a college education who had social concerns early on, and a way of getting involved was to provide community service or advise groups in economically disadvantaged conditions. Over time they created a project and finally an organization dedicated to helping groups in poverty conditions based on specific objectives. Generally speaking, they had spent part of their lives in these kinds of activities, as indicated in the following paragrah:

“...I’ve been doing this since, well, I participated in social events since I was nine years old in my community... as an altar boy I liked to sing in church... When I was 14 years old, no, 15, I started to work as a volunteer in an orphanage... at about of age 19 I did volunteer work with drug addicts... I studied and got involved with a neighborhood community, and also with volunteer work in Christian base communities and forming cooperatives and nutritional courses in poor neighborhoods. Since I returned to the [village] where I was born, I’ve worked on nutrition, natural medicine, people’s theater, and finally we got involved in the project... where I devote most of my volunteer efforts...” (44 year-old man, founder and volunteer)

In other cases, I found women who had participated for more than a decade in different organizations to support and improve the condition of women in poorer neighborhoods, attending to sick people with few resources or with some disability. Others were professional women who contributed their knowledge and concern to attend to unprotected children or dedicated themselves to health care for women who are in poverty.

“...before we used to live in [another city]; I was in a program supporting groups there for eight years... but, as would be the correct use of the word philanthropy, we used to support by collecting funds... Then we came here and the institution where my husband worked decided to do this on a national level. It was by invitation without any commitment... We began in a sector of poorer neighborhoods and we liked it a lot... That’s where we started; we began with women in the neighborhoods..., knocking on doors where they just let us start with motivational talks and some handicrafts and learning to read, and well, in a basic way... That was in ninety-two... We’ve been at it for fifteen years.” (46 year-old woman, founder and volunteer in the regional section of an organization)

“I began by going with that woman [the founder], accompanying her, you see, and watching the work she did and learning... and becoming conscious of the needs there were... seeing the sick people... And then I started to get more involved, you know,... helping to get support... and I started with her in 1985, since before they did away with the old hospital, about one or two years before they inaugurated the new hospital, you see.” (62 year-old woman, housewife, volunteer, and part of the staff)

Another 55% of the group had been participating in organizations for between 1 and 5 years and had undertaken similar activities on their own before that. This is a more complex universe in terms of ages where we find some young and middle-aged

men as well as women, many of whom are housewives or retired. Another group was made up of young people who had supported the planning of the organization where they were now or had participated in its founding and were now directors or coordinators. Or else, people who came to the organization to provide services as part of their college education and, once there, had become involved with the project and stayed to support it.

“No, I had never really [done volunteer work]. I came here to do my social service and I stayed... Yes, I finished in February... I don’t remember... in 2003... I’ve been here for three and a half years. Now I’m part of the staff... I stayed, you see... It was like part of a dream; I dreamt of being a professional soccer player... and finding out about the salary, and right there I began to be concerned about forming an organization for street children... So I couldn’t do the first thing, but the second one I could...” (22 year-old man, volunteer coordinator)

“...everything began with my masters’ project. I wanted to do a project and I didn’t want it to be something without importance, although all the business projects were important, but that’s what I’d always done... But I wanted to do something worthwhile... I thought an institution like this could help a lot... A project occurred to me, I came to see [the president] and, well, it was great, I liked it, and well, yes, it was like retaking an aspect or taking up an aspect that I had been neglecting... I said that I’m going to take advantage of what I have to do and I got more involved in this... It must be a little more than a year now; my masters’ project was for three months... and now it’s been the rest of the year.” (26 year-old woman, volunteer)

I found many people whose family has helped in different ways, whether contributing resources or offering other types of support. When they form their own families, they find they share the concern of their spouse and they both begin to get involved with specific organizations, where they contribute their time to develop some activity.

“...look, in my family there has always been a great concern for others... but here... [in the organization], through my wife’s family... and really it was due to them. One day we were at a family dinner... They started to talk politics and... the social action projects he had been supporting came out in the discussion and, well, this woman [one of the people from the board of trustees] began to tell us about the work they did here, and I got interested... She invited me to be a child’s godfather and I came here to the offices, and I remember very clearly that they were passing out care packages and I helped them... And now I’ll have been here for two years this August.” (32 year-old man, volunteer)

Twenty-one percent of the group has not had any experience as volunteers, since they are people who have worked in the organizations and receive a salary for doing so. Young men and women who have decided to have a personal experience of this kind and have sought out the way to do so for the first time are also located here.

## **Time Devoted and Kinds of Activities Performed by Volunteers**

In this section, several variants in terms of dedication and type of activities undertaken by different groups of volunteers are discussed. I encountered two very distinct groups in this regard: “intense volunteers,” i.e., people who devoted between

7 and 10 h a day to volunteer work in organizations, and a variable group whose participation varied from 1½ to 10 h per week.

The people who worked a full day as volunteers were mostly young people still living with their families and, therefore, it was their parents who were supporting them, although some faced certain economic problems. Others were women between the ages of 45 and 50 years who were housewives or who provided auxiliary assistance for their husbands in their business activities, with a great deal of their time devoted to the organization they had promoted or that they led. With regard to the young volunteers, I found that they had made the decision to dedicate a few years of their lives to working in an organization, thinking they were contributing to help others, and at the same time acquiring experience.

The second group devoted between 1½ and 10 h a week to volunteer work. I found that they were people who planned and devoted precise amounts of time to their economic activity and combined this with work as volunteers, which they did once to three times per week. In other cases, they were women who were housewives or employees who distributed their time among their household responsibilities, the activity that provided them with economic income, and their volunteer work.

Those who devoted themselves to volunteer work on a full-time basis had made the decision to commit themselves to a project they had also initiated. That is to say, some of the members made the decision in agreement with the group to commit themselves to assuming leadership and taking responsibility for fulfilling the objectives of what they had created over a period of time of 2–3 years. This was with the expectation that someone else would later replace them, which has happened in some cases. This has led these volunteers to practically dedicate their lives to guaranteeing the permanence of the project, even at the cost of not entering the labor market, which has caused problems for some. Although these volunteers were aware of the amount of time they devoted to what they were doing, they were also conscious of the difficulties in trying to reduce the work load and even to find someone to replace them, given the commitment that taking responsibility for the organization implied.

“How long... let’s see, if I get there at eight and I leave at five, that’s... eight, nine hours. Subtracting lunch, that’s eight hours a day: a hypothesis, because yesterday, for example, I left at six-thirty, so... Not for the last week... let’s see... last week I was working until seven, from eight to seven, more or less, or 11 hours a day... But, the truth is I really try to leave. For example, it’s four o’clock and if somebody comes in who can stay, I leave.” (32 year-old woman, founder and volunteer)

Assuming the responsibility to carry the project forward implies undertaking multiple activities and tasks of a very diverse nature, from tending to daily chores to generating fund-raising projects for the organization.

“...Well, for example, I got here today, I prayed, and then at eight or eight fifteen, the children start to arrive. So I receive them, etc., and they go directly in to have breakfast. I hardly even go into the kitchen. Then I check my mail, what I have to do. Since the cleaning girl came late, I went up to the hall. When she finished, I was coordinating like... I opened the silkscreen workshop. I had some things to do, so I spent some time checking a project that I’m finishing up. I started to talk about movies, we’re going to show a movie, and well... At one-thirty I went up to help the young people who work here bring the

children down to eat and all that. I was checking the kitchen to make sure everything was OK and all that. Then I went to see an accountant who does the report for the institution, to see if we are in time, when we're going to do it and everything. I came back, I ate... what else did I do? ... Well, as always, I prepared some things for some activities, what we're going to do, recreation, what had to be sent off. Then I checked my mail again... and that's all." (28-year old woman, volunteer director of an organization)

In the case of young people from other countries with a commitment they understand for a specific period of time, which is in fact the case, will be in dedicating time and help with the organization's activities. They will work together on a daily basis with the personnel and the users, usually children or young people in poverty; these are the people they are to help, carrying out the activities they are told to do. In this case, there is a personal decision to devote a specific amount of time to this experience, and they prefer to look for organizations in developing countries.

"I'm committed for about two months. I'm working intensely... I'm like a monitor in a neighborhood for children who have experienced and suffered a lot... I live in a house they call 'the community'... I help with the daily work in the house and in the afternoon I help the kids with their school work... I don't just watch but do some things. It's not about sitting around with your arms crossed. On the other hand, I work helping the resident to get the groceries and have everything ready for when the kids come. Sometimes I go with him to look for things at the supermarket, and in the afternoon, if it's necessary, we go with some kid to buy things for their homework. [The town] is close by, and we buy the things there in some stationary store." (21 year-old student volunteer)

For other young people, helping others is an activity that is part of what they do in their everyday lives for the community where they live. Therefore, they have to coordinate this with their work schedule, where they get the resources to live and be able to fulfill their personal commitment. Some of them even help during their free time and on the weekends...

"Well, I work here every afternoon. My work there is from eight to four. Then I go home to take a bath, eat, and then I come here... It's about two hours in the afternoon... It's close to here... They tell me to lead the workshop, to provide training... I'm already a promoter... I also prepare my work. I write about my subjects and I have to get information about it..." (21 year-old man, employee, volunteer)

"Well, look, the fact is, it's on a monthly basis, every month I go see them [the organization]. Sometimes it's on Friday, Saturdays and Sundays. On Friday it's from two-thirty or three in the afternoon until seven, eight, nine at night. On Saturday from nine-thirty to ten in the morning or until four or five in the afternoon. If it's on Sunday, we also go at nine, ten in the morning until four, five in the afternoon... So it's almost a marathon. You end up physically tired, but mentally rested." (26 year-old man, volunteer)

There are also cases of women with household responsibilities who, on their own or because of invitations from other people, made the decision to participate in specific organizations as volunteers, so they have a very precise idea of the time they devote to these support activities.

"Well, here doing volunteer work about eight hours a week, or just when it's necessary to do some procedure or other things, it's a little more time, a little extra, or when you have

to buy things like stationary, you know, those kinds of things.” (45 year-old woman, volunteer founder)

“In the case of the NGOs [referring to others in which she also participates], well, they’re, ah, let’s say every month on the board, since it’s once a month, say, about three hours for the meeting. And here, as committee members, it’s once a month for two hours. So that’s five hours altogether.” (45 year-old woman, volunteer founder)

There is variety in terms of the amount of time devoted to helping others, but in a high percentage of cases, there is a relatively clear idea of the amount of time dedicated to volunteer work, while a minority has a certain lack of clarity in this regard. In the latter case, we are talking about people who have assumed a commitment to carry forward the project they have initiated or to which they have been invited.

## **Individual and Family Background and Participation in Non-profit Organizations**

In order to understand why people became interested in participating in activities to help others and become volunteers, I analyzed the life histories of the subjects in order to find elements that would make it possible to explain this practice. That is, I examined the question of whether there was something in their background in terms of their family, their personal interests, or some kind of event that would explain their participation in these activities.

I found that 57% of all those interviewed had been influenced by their immediate and/or extended family, to be concerned about others. Another 23% had been influenced by their spouse, siblings, or family friends. In 20% of the cases, I did not find a specific prior influence, but rather an event that had occurred in their lives that unleashed this interest. In other cases, a personal commitment had arisen during the process of their education, in relation to evident social inequality when working with different groups.

These findings make it possible for me to affirm that, in accordance with the information collected, a key element with certain pre-eminence that leads subject to be concerned about others is the family group. Specifically, the family is the place for interaction where learning takes place and among other things, about what reciprocity means, the performance of specific activities, as well as processes of transmitting values and principles that will be put into practice in adult life.

Let’s qualify this affirmation now. Although it was evident in some cases that those interviewed had been taught by their families, through practice, to be concerned about others beyond the group of their relatives, it did not seem so evident to some of them that this was indeed the case. Rather, when examining their life history, the family came out as a key element. When reflecting on the question, the role played by their father, mother, grandparents, or an aunt and uncle in learning this became evident.

"I grew up with an uncle. I love him a lot, since I lived with him since I was about eight years old... My uncle had a neighborhood pharmacy in Spain... He kind of had the idea that if he, as the pharmacist, left the employee to prepare the medicines, and then he wasn't going to do it. He also watched the pharmacy at night... The point is, my uncle felt responsible for the health of the people in the neighborhood. They were taking care of him, his mother, and his sister, and in exchange, he had to give them something back... In the mornings he went over the prescriptions and then went out for a walk on the street to see the people he knew were sick or whatever... Then he'd give them medicine on credit. I don't think they ever paid him, but it was understood as something of value... So I grew up seeing that, his responsibility to the people he felt depended on him. It wasn't true, but, well, he thought it was... I grew up with that, which was the opposite from my aunt..." (63 year-old man, performing acts of solidarity on an individual basis)

Among family members, participation in volunteer work is often due to the influence of the mother, especially for women. This fact was confirmed by 32% of women through what they said and considered in this regard, while the influence was much less for men. Only 10.5% of the men explicitly mentioned the influence of their mothers on their participation in volunteer work. Here, however, the subject of values, ethics, and religion was included as an element explaining this kind of orientation. This leads us to affirm that the socialization process is the time when a complex process takes place in which values inculcated by the mother are combined with specific practices that will have a determining influence for those people who will become involved in support activities for third parties in their adult life.

"In the case of my mother... She always used to say that you have to sow in order to reap... I don't remember her belonging to any club... She was with Catholic action with the neighbors. I remember that if someone needed something, my mother was always ready to help. And that's like something that always stayed with me, that saying of hers." (52 year-old woman, volunteer and director)

In other cases, it was a complex mix of religious values promoted by the family group combined with their education and some event in the person's life that influenced them and unleashed a process that led them onto the path of volunteerism.

"I think that the education I received, both from my parents and especially the academic education I received, has a lot to do with it. I remember that ever since I was a little girl we would go to the outlying neighborhoods in the city... I participated there since I was very young. We had a school; we created a school, right there in the garbage dump... I've always wanted to be God's instrument... Before my son was born, I prayed that I might be His instrument at the same time I was pregnant, when I didn't have any idea I was going to have a son with a disability. He sent me a son with a disability... So the message from Him was very clear..." (54 year-old woman, volunteer founder).

It should be added that this complex mix of elements has led a person to consider that their vocation or calling was something beyond just a personal or family problem, and she has focused on helping others in similar situations. According to the information collected, for some people, commitment is expressed in the concern for resolving or contributing in some way to the solution of a problem affecting their community, a decision that is undoubtedly not very common, even when this may



be of a philanthropic nature.<sup>6</sup> This kind of decision is made especially by women, and this has been documented for other similar cases, especially by the media.

This kind of situation was not present in all cases. For one group it is a matter of concern about social affairs, in the sense of doing something about the abysmal social differentiation that broad sectors of the population suffer, which has played a fundamental role in promoting participation in activities to help or give advice to third parties. In this case, it is a matter of ideas formed in specific contexts or key moments in people's lives, which resulted in them having a different perspective at a very early point in their lives. It might be thought that inclinations toward this kind of participation are not related to the family, but rather to the subject's specific experiences and interaction with peers.

"[When I was a student] I came up in a context I think was very interesting: '68. Many things made an impact on me: the French '68 movement, the whole movement against the Vietnam War, Martin Luther King's civil rights movement, and 1968 in Mexico... I was one of the few that were into that trip at that time... The whole question of social justice... The whole more conscious, more committed change, shall we say, at that time... All that in an environment that invited you to do something. And then I found myself, I found myself through friends and acquaintances and since then..." (58 year-old man, volunteer).

For other people this process occurs during their adult life, after having formed a family, with the interaction with friends who invite them to get involved and they do it "because they enjoy it" or due to a special interest, for example, in children. In these cases the process began in order to share things with friends, which led them to get more involved than what they originally expected.

"[When already married with kids], some friends [from where the husband worked] invited me to participate. I liked going to the neighborhoods a lot, being in contact with the children, with the mothers, all of that... And I always used to say 'God, send me a job where I can make a little money and I'll devoted myself to something with children'. That's what I used to say, and he sent me here, which doesn't pay anything, and it's a whole bunch of coordination things, but it's very satisfying. I'm happy. Really, you believe there's a need around you, but you don't get it and you don't see it until you're here. I love the children. I'm getting to know all of them little by little. So here we are." (47 year-old woman, volunteer president)

In reviewing the histories of these subjects who are volunteers, the role played by family and relatives in volunteer activities is evident. However, the process of socialization that takes place within the family stands out due to its importance, and particularly the practice and communication on the part of the mother figure. Friendships made in the course of the subject's life also influence this participation, most of which begin in adult life.

Although less relevant, at least for the group analyzed, events or occurrences affecting the subject's life are often a trigger leading to practical action that may even lead to the promotion or creation of organized forms of support transcending

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<sup>6</sup>I say that it is not common, since in Mexico we have thousands of people with some kind of disability and, consequently, thousands of families who have helped people in this condition, yet there are not thousands of associations dedicated to this as a result.

personal problems. However, everything is not a matter of learning or of reproducing certain practices, since there are other elements, such as social commitment, that also hold a predominant position, as will be discussed when analyzing the organizations. This leads to a different kind of participation in organizations that is necessarily distinct from philanthropy or assistance organizations, and more directed towards social commitment and responsibility.

## **The Context and Reasons for Participating in Volunteer Groups**

In the preceding sections, I have presented a general profile for volunteer workers, and at the same time, the diversity of situations and contexts that have influenced the subjects' decision to make a commitment to these kinds of activities has been explored. Now I am interested in examining concrete examples where it is possible to observe how the subject's life history is interwoven with societal elements that, in the end, lead to specific practices. For this purpose, I have selected four cases – three women and one man – where it is possible to observe who these volunteers are, what they have been like during different stages of their lives, and how their actions are interwoven until a subject concerned about helping others, and at times having links of solidarity with their community, emerges.

### ***Aurelia: Acts of Solidarity Among Equals***

Aurelia is a 43 year-old woman born into a peasant family in the north, like many others in Mexico. She was the oldest of five siblings, and when she remembers her childhood, she considers it to have been sad, difficult, and full of precariousness, with a constant struggle to make the arid land where they lived produce, although with little success. They had to migrate from one community to another, which led to her father becoming a wage worker for a while, which was a difficult time, since one of her brothers and her mother got sick. Like many peasant families in our country, they were completely attached to the land, so, after a while, they once again obtained a small piece of land.

In terms of education, she only studied, with interruptions, up to fourth grade in elementary school, since her mother was constantly sick and the family was also always moving. When Aurelia was 12 years old, she began to work washing and ironing other people's clothes and helping her father with work in the country, since her mother was still sick, it was necessary for her to contribute to the family's survival. When she was 20 years old, she got married to another peasant like herself. From her point of view, her life improved. Both of them started to work, they had four children, which they were able to send to school, although "they didn't give them the education they would have wanted" due to a lack of sufficient resources to do so.

Aurelia was always active. She tried to help her husband, learned how to make bread, and sold it to help.

When analyzing her life and identifying when and why she began to get interested in helping others in some way, we found that at age 23 she began to organize women in her community to receive supports and improve their homes. . She took up the task of organizing a committee of women poorer than her, since she has always been interested in helping “the poorest of the poor.” This was at a time when government projects were focusing on providing privies and other construction materials. She actively participated for her group to receive these resources, although she was not always successful.

In the 1990s, she and her group of women heard about the organization which she belongs to now and joined it. With that, there was a small improvement. She was able to get cement and sheet metal to fix up their houses, and she made sure that debts for the materials provided were paid. Some years later, they had to deal with the fact that the Conasupo warehouses were closed and they were left at the mercy of the “coyotes,” to whom they had to sell their products at whatever price were demanded. She participated more actively in the face of this difficult situation. She took courses and learned to apply for supports. She dedicated herself to promoting production projects, and the group of women left the problems of marketing to the men.

The main activities Aurelia has carried out in the organization have been helping women in her community apply for projects aimed at improving the situation of poverty in which they live. For this purpose, she sought information about the characteristics of the proposals available and once she had found it, she dedicated herself to visiting the communities to promote and get specific projects started. This has been something urgent for her, since the migration of men leaving the zone has increased in recent years, and the communities now consist of women heading the household and caring for the children, while their husbands work “in the North” to be able to send resources, which do not always arrive.

She is part of this group and despite the efforts to promote the establishment of production projects; these have not always been successful, especially in recent years. Two years ago, her two oldest children migrated to the United States and a year ago her husband decided to do the same thing, due to the precariousness of their situation. Currently, she divides her time between caring for their small piece of land, making bread, taking care of her two youngest daughters, and doing the housework. She also works to support women in nearby communities as a coordinator in the organization in which she has gained respect from others. She thinks that it is important to continue working in that organization, since she has been able to develop, little by little, a small patrimony for her children. The work she does is exhaustive, with long days and constant travel to apply for support for their communities. Nevertheless, she has not thought of abandoning the work she does of helping the poorest of the poor, the peasant women like her, not due to an altruistic concern but out of a social consciousness that corresponds to the organization where she participates.

### ***Martha: The Need to Help***

Martha is a young, 28 year-old woman born into a middle-class family. She is the eldest of two children and lives with her parents and grandmother in the family house. Her father is a self-employed professional and her mother worked as a secretary until she retired. She came to the area when she was little, since her family, who lived in the Federal District, decided to move after the 1985 earthquake.

Her education was in private schools and she received her bachelor's degree in education. After graduating, she had several jobs, interim positions, where she substituted for other teachers. She worked like this for 2 years, which allowed her to get to know other communities apart from where she lived. Finally, she had to decide between looking for work outside the area and staying there. She decided to do the latter, since she had become involved, together with other young people, in forming an organization.

When trying to establish the reasons she decided to help others with her time and knowledge, we found that her family had a certain tradition of helping others *as much as they could*. She remembers her trips to the north-east of Mexico from when she was a little girl, to visit her parents' families with the car full of clothes, toys, and groceries that they took in order to contribute in some way. Her mother did this as well, since she was not very attached to material goods, and if someone needed something, she would lend it to them and not necessarily get it back. In this family group in which there is a constant concern for others, the subject who most stands out is the grandmother, who, at her advanced age, has been going for 10 years, every Tuesday and Thursday, to an orphanage to prepare the food.

So she has been brought up and formed based on a tradition of helping. When she was 11, Martha actively participated with a group of scouts. In her opinion, this reinforced her service orientation, and starting at that time she began to work with children at risk due to living in conflictive places. During her college years, she continued to seek out organizations or people to be able to help in some way, at the same time she was learning from other professionals. She completed her social service in a community center where a group of psychologists provided professional help for minors, and once she finished, she decided to stay for another 2 years.

Six years ago, she met a group of four young people who helped street children. They invited her to participate and she accepted. At the beginning she did not have much time, since she worked in the mornings. Eventually, she decided to stay in the new organization. Analyzing the reasons she decided to stay, she considers it to be a matter of faith: "*God goes about arranging things and they happen.*" Her parents supported her in this decision, providing her with what was necessary to live. Participating in this group has been very important for her, since she has had the chance to see that these children, who live in very difficult circumstances, have access to education, food, workshops, entertainment, and attention from people willing to do this.

The last 3 years of her life have been particularly difficult because she lost the person who was going to be her life partner after a long period of illness. He was someone with whom she shared a help project, the mover and creator of the organization. After a long process of mourning, she says “*I’ve started to live from day to day,*” and plans to continue because it’s “*God’s will*” and because she has made the decision to make Christianity the guiding principle of her life, not simply a religion, and “*God has placed me at the head of the project, so that it can continue.*” This is why, over the past 2 years, she has taken the reins of the process of consolidating the organization where she is a full-time volunteer.

In terms of her everyday activities, at first she helped the children directly so they would receive their meals on time and so the teachers would start their classes and the children would be ready. Or when some children did not come, she would go to see them to find out what was happening. Later, her activities changed because she was able to organize the everyday activities so that they could develop without her. As a result, she now concentrates on designing projects so that the organization can develop more resources to continue to develop, collecting donations for daily expenses and involving more people as collaborators. In this case, there is a complex mix of values and personal events interwoven with a family tradition that has kept her on the path of volunteerism.

### ***Ernestina: In the Face of Need, a Good Orientation and Support***

Ernestina is a 45 year-old woman born into a middle-class family and the older of two sisters. Her father is a rural businessman and her mother is a housewife. She studied in private schools and finished high school. She did not go to college, but instead decided to get married. Her husband used to be a salaried professional who has devoted himself to business activities over the last few years. They have two older children who are still studying.

When analyzing her life history in order to determine how long she has been carrying out these kinds of activities and the reasons for doing so, we found out that during her childhood she helped her grandmother who had devoted herself to teaching the children of the day laborers how to read and write. They were not always successful, but since some did learn, they continued doing it. In school, she also liked to participate in activities that had to do with collecting clothes or money for others, as was also the case in church, where she taught catechism classes.

However, once she was married, she concentrated completely on her new household duties, and caring for and raising the children and attending to her husband. Six years ago, now that her children were grown, one of the other mothers at the school invited her to sell tickets to collect funds. It seemed to her to be a good idea and she accepted. In the beginning she sold tickets for raffles or sold clothes, but she did not know about the kind of activities that were being financed this way.

Finally, she had the opportunity to find out about the work the organization accomplished. She was invited by the promoter to visit the sick that they helped and

accompanied her on her rounds for some time. As a result when she was invited again to become part of the group, she accepted at once, since, from her point of view, she had always been concerned about sick people getting well.

When she started participating, she only received support from her younger son, while her daughter and husband had some reservations. Her husband thought it meant neglecting her duties as wife and mother, and her daughter thought she would neglect her. On the other hand, Ernestina's mother was sick and she frequently traveled to help her. She established a schedule for the obligations she had acquired, trying to keep them from interfering with her previous duties.

To her the reasons she participated in this organization that helps sick people with severe economic difficulties, is "*a moral commitment, like everything in life.*" In practical terms, she explains, it is based on having had the chance to see for herself that with the right orientation and support, people who are in a difficult situation at some point can get back on their feet.

So what is involved is a commitment, a decision to help based on recognizing the existence of needs that have to do with precarious economic circumstances, together with a lack of institutional knowledge and a lack of information on the part of the people, which can be remedied by someone's help, or with the help of people, like her, who have voluntarily decided to do so.<sup>7</sup>

Her first actions were to get information about how the institutions related to the health sector operate, who to contact when something happens, and information about certain kinds of diseases, so as to have an idea of what the patient might need and for how long. She has also given the organization a new drive by posing the need for developing a structure that makes it possible for each person in charge of an area to have a clear idea of their responsibility. She has been at the organization as a volunteer for several years, from Monday to Friday, from 9 in the morning until 3 in the afternoon. Two years ago, she was named coordinator of one of the areas.

In terms of the kinds of activities she was involved in, these basically consist of helping people with few resources, many of them speakers of indigenous languages, who come with sick family members, so it is necessary to help them with processes and requirements they need to fulfill, or with studies they need, and even, in the case of a death, with the whole process of transferring the deceased.

Her other activities also included identifying people's problems and finding a solution, in accordance with the organization's resources, and taking part in the area of relations with other institutions to get temporary support from young people doing social service. This is due to the difficulty faced in recruiting volunteers. Her main concern is to be able to recruit volunteers, which is not an easy task, since they only stay for short periods of time because of the types of problems they attend to.

In Ernestina's case, her altruistic concerns stand out as a reason for helping those who, because of their precarious conditions, have few tools to solve the serious problems they face.

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<sup>7</sup>The consistency she shows in why she engages in these kinds of activities should be noted, insofar as they are basically the same reasons that can attributed to the work she did as an adolescent when she taught workers' children to read and write.

### ***Francisco: Commitment to Others***

Francisco is a 32 year-old man born into a middle-class family in the north of Mexico who has five siblings. His father is a businessman and his mother a housewife. In terms of his education, he studied and went to college and then studied for his master's. He worked for a few years as a salaried professional, and 2 years ago, after marrying, moved to a city in the west where his wife lives. They are currently the owners of a small business which they both run.

When trying to determine the history of volunteer-type activities and the reasons he has been involved in them, it is evident that his family has always been concerned about others. His father made donations to an orphanage on a regular basis, which Francisco found one day when he found the receipts. Also the family received a kind of crumplet known as “*buñuelos de viento*” every Christmas from the nuns at the orphanage. His father and his brothers all participated in social work with scout groups, such as going to an orphanage to play with the children, or participating in collections for a senior care home and taking them for dinner on Saturdays. His mother also had a way in which she helped, which consisted of organizing the collection of used clothes with her friends, which they would take and distribute in nearby rural communities.

However, he says that it was not always this way, and that there was a time when he forgot about others. When he was about to finish high school and during a large part of his college life, his interests had changed and he went out with friends, he liked to have girl friends and have fun with them. In other words, he liked to do what people of his age usually do, if they are in conditions to do so. In his last year of college, a student association invited him to develop social help project, which he accepted immediately. The result of his participation in this activity was that he realized that it was possible to help others in an organized way. He developed some projects which he later took charge of. That was the time when he met the person who would be his wife, who also participated in similar activities. When he started to work, he had to suspend his relationship with these groups again. Two years ago he became involved again, when he received an invitation from the person in charge of an organization dedicated to taking care of children who work on the streets.

When analyzing the reasons that have led him to participate in these types of projects, he confessed that he had not thought about this. However, after thinking about it, he suggested that it is “*something that comes to you, he couldn't be indifferent if someone required his help.*” It is a question of learning which led him to undertake actions to help others for personal satisfaction. When relating it to his background, this seems to indicate that he does not look for recognition for what he does, but rather that it has been an everyday thing in his life. Over and over in the conversations, he reiterated that he is a person convinced of the “*butterfly effect*” which, to him, means that “*a small action can have an impact on consequences for a person, group, or society, not like in the movie, but in real life.*”

In relation to the kind of activities that he participates in as a volunteer in the organization, he says he does everything, including providing support in the office,

helping to repair computers, carrying groceries, or talking with the children's parents. This last activity is particularly interesting to him, especially understanding that for some parents it is more important to continue receiving money in the household from the work of their children in the streets than if those children were to study. In cases like this his work then, is to try to convince them to receive the support that the organization provides them with and that things will work out better for everyone in the long run if their children go to school and to the workshops. Although he is aware that it is not something easy. The part he likes the most about his work is helping children catch up with their studies and designing computer courses for the older children, as a future employment option. This is the activity he has been involved in for the last 2 years, and he devotes two afternoons a week to it, and occasionally weekends when needed, while his wife takes care of their business.

### *A Brief Review*

In these four case extracts, it can be seen how subjects, who are concerned about others develop, in the course of their lives. The complexity of the elements that come into play in different ways to characterize the subjects' orientation is clear, as well as how they give meaning to their actions and revalue them in each context. In this sense, there is not a single type of volunteer, but rather several types of volunteers, where their life history plays a fundamental role.

In some cases, like that of Aurelia, a life of precarious conditions transforms a person into someone with a clear idea of solidarity with their community, even when they may not know the term, they express it with their actions. It is an awareness that one is living in a world where their precarious conditions are not so bad compared to those of others, and this implies the need to help them and to educate oneself to do so.

In other cases, like Martha's, it is derived from aspects interwoven with social environments, religion in her case, and a certain kind of altruistic attitude which leads to helping the needy, living in a Christian way to serve them, to alleviate in some way the situation of those living in difficult circumstances, in this case children who have had to take to the streets to help their families. In this case too, a truncated process of transition to forming her own family leads her to the path of fulfilling everything the two of them had planned before.

There are other cases like Ernestina's, whose concern for others beyond her immediate family waited until she completed an important part of her life cycle. When her children had grown and just before they formed their own families, she decided to embark into a new service, establishing a moral commitment that links her past and future, where what will become the other part of her life begins to take shape. But she not only established a moral commitment, she also educated herself to fulfill it and rationalized the details of why she was doing so, at the same time giving meaning to her actions.



Even the determinant role played by the biological families' positive influence, as in Francisco's case, can be observed to lead the subject to try to replicate what educated him at an earlier moment and acquire a long-term commitment. Here it seems to have to do with how the subject conceives society and himself as part of a framework in which specific actions can lead to greater well-being.

So far, I have analyzed the characteristics of the population interviewed, as well as their life histories, where we observe different ways in which the subjects become concerned about others and the multiplicity of reasons that explain this kind of orientation. The following section will be devoted to a different kind of exercise in which we try to explore how the subjects interviewed define their activities and assign them specific terms when referring to them. The purpose is to analyze the terms with which they themselves define their activities, so as to develop a semantic field providing certain homogeneity to their diversity and defining the context in which the terms are employed. The intention is to quantify the sentences of the actors involved in order to construct specific hypotheses about their volunteer activity and thereby develop a general profile.

This kind of analysis shows that the members of the organization, both volunteers and employees, share similar codes regarding what they do and why they do it. Based on this, it is posited that being an employee or volunteer in these non-profit organizations is perceived, by the group as a whole, as an activity that is different from activities carried out in the governmental or private sectors.

## Conceptual Map of Volunteer Activities

The purpose of this analysis is to structure the information generated by the interviews based on sets of variables or attributes in order to "code" the information based on the expressive context of the subjects interviewed. In spite of the fact that, within the overall information, the individual characteristics of the subjects are very heterogeneous, it is possible to note outstanding similarities among men and women that make it possible to propose a prototype volunteer profile for the Mexican case.<sup>8</sup>

The *NVivo* program<sup>9</sup> was used for this analysis, which makes it possible to examine the subjects' codes based on text patterns in the responses derived from the interviews. For this purpose, patterns were sought which expressed volunteer

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<sup>8</sup>We hope that new investigations on this subject will be generated in the near future and that this volunteer prototype is used to either reinforce these findings or criticize what is indicated here.

<sup>9</sup>In order to carry out the analysis with the *NVivo* program, we were assisted by José Sánchez and Soledad de León, both of whom are experts on this program, and whose valuable findings helped to explore new analytical territory in this field. The conceptual map that they designed makes it possible for the reader to understand how the relationships in what was expressed in the interviews were established.

acts, representations, ideas, and feelings, which led to a group of semantic categories recurring in the interviews.

Of the total of 66 interviews, those that had between 98.5 and 75.7% similar responses<sup>10</sup> were compared, which resulted in the following semantic field regarding volunteer actions: “Giving,” “support/help,” “I think,” “what is needed,” “deficiencies,” “what should be done,” “satisfaction/like it,” and “I feel.” By taking into consideration the range of greater frequencies, the following conceptual map (see Fig. 3.1) was established, which constitutes the central nucleus of what was clearly shown in the interviews as a whole.

In order to construct hypotheses or implication relations between codes, intersections are established between two general conditions: men + code versus women + code. In each case, the code contrasted is indicated and a comparative analysis between both groups is derived.

Based on this conceptual map, it is possible to affirm that the activities of those interviewed, both volunteers and other members of the organization, are defined by them as the act of giving, helping, and supporting others, believing in what they do and in what is lacking or needs to be done. When the participants in volunteer activities evaluate their own actions, they assume a prospective position, i.e., in most cases, they believe that what still needs to be done and is necessary to do is a task of great scope, and therefore there is a need to promote these kinds of activi-

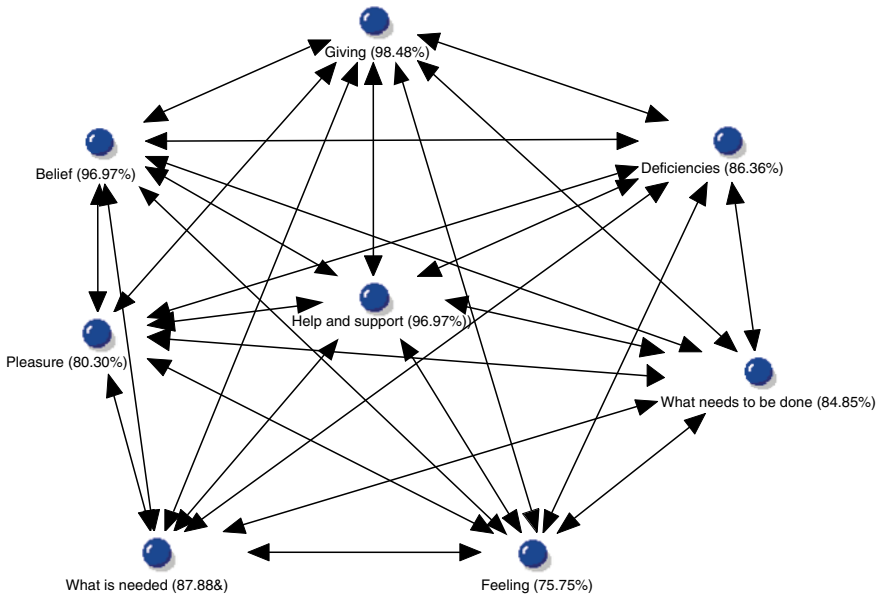


Fig. 3.1 Conceptual Map of Volunteer Activities

<sup>10</sup>Between 65 and 50 similar responses.

ties. Similarly, the group of people interviewed expressed the satisfaction they feel because of what they do, so this return is more important than the possibility of receiving economic payment for doing it. When referring to the activity, those interviewed describe it in a subjective way, i.e., that it is done because of the satisfaction and gratification that comes from supporting others.

### *Giving, Helping, and Believing as Frequent Terms*

In order to develop a detailed vision of what the conceptual map shows, a group of eight hypotheses were proposed to interpret the selected codes. The hypotheses establish the correspondence among the structural aspects and the most influential semantic field elements, in the definition that the people interviewed provide us for what a volunteer is. Extracts are also included from some of the paragraphs to substantiate the hypotheses formulated.

When analyzing the information with *NVivo*, it was found that it was homogeneous if the results of the codification were compared when distinguishing between men and women. On the other hand, it is important to reiterate that the position held by the different actors interviewed in the organizations is not determinate in the semantic composition, so their responses are not compared.

### *Hypothesis 1: Men Conceive of Giving Differently than Women Do*

Men and women express the idea of promoting social advancement and economic well-being for others through volunteer activities. However, when dealing with sharing these ideals of giving, there are important differences in the way they are perceived: for men, donations have a social character referring to the community, social networks, commitment, and institutions. For women, giving is also a form of personal redemption since, by favoring the growth of others, the person who undertakes the specific activity or actions perceives a growth of her own person.

**Man:** I'm going to be sincere, well, I didn't used to believe in this, that you have to "give to receive", but with the passage of time, you begin to find out what the movement is like. I liked participating, working, collaborating in the community, because it's the only way somebody who's in a screwed up situation can get ahead and get some benefit, something for the family. Because otherwise, it's difficult; no, it's impossible. It can't be done. (50 years old, volunteer coordinator)

**Woman:** This group of volunteers was founded in Mexico twenty years ago with the idea of helping people of limited resources to get ahead and **give** them the means, as we say between quotation marks, the means for them to be able to have an economic income and hence a better quality of life... Well, I really feel that God has blessed me a great deal... and I feel that, well, we should give a little, **give** of our time, to benefit others. It's a great sat-

isfaction... Since, look, it's also a way for you yourself to grow, because dealing with these people is very enriching. (44 years old, volunteer founder)

### ***Hypothesis 2: Men and Women Conceive of Concern for Helping Differently***

Apparently, women conceive helping in a more disinterested way than men do. In keeping with Hypothesis 1, men see helping as something useful for the growth of others and for strengthening interpersonal relations. For women, it is a moral concern, a commitment toward others.

**Man:** helping others is something I've always liked. I think that that is also part of why I fell in love with my wife, since she is also someone who likes to help others... I've never thought that there has to be a special reason for helping others, it's something that comes to you... I think it might be something that's already in your blood... Maybe what motivates me to stop and help others is, well, that I've always had an example at home... To me, this has always been something natural that I learned to live with since I was a boy... Both my parents and my brothers and sisters have always helped others, whether, as I said, through the scouts or with my mother's group... or by your own volition. (32 years old, volunteer)

**Woman:** Well, in my mother's house, she always said that you have to sow to reap and, although at that time, no, I don't remember her belonging to any club, but there she was with Catholic action with the neighbors. I remember that if someone needed something, my mother was always ready to help. And that's like something that always stayed with me, that saying of hers. (46 years old, volunteer founder)

### ***Hypothesis 3: Volunteer Participation Is Clearly Defined as a Function of Beliefs***

Working for others for the good of others is a value shared by both men and women. Finding out about what people lack and their needs is translated into motivation and commitment for the person participating in volunteer activities, who gives his or her work an ethical sense that is vaguely located on the threshold between religiosity and lay principles. It is a conviction rooted in principles where what one should be is disinterested and generous, and that is what allows for the growth of others and of oneself.

**Man:** Although I heard a lot about missions and missionaries when I was little, I think that today we are all missionaries in some way, even if we aren't religious, which I don't think has anything to do with this. I think that if we all help, we can live helping others to better themselves and I think you yourself also grow when you help others grow. (47 years old, volunteer)

**Woman:** Look, personally I feel fulfilled, because I realize the needs that exist in our society, and you become more human and try to solve or minimize those problems to the degree possible. I think we should all participate for society, because there's a great deficiency, a great deal of selfless cooperation is needed. We should not just work when we get paid, but work giving whatever time we have, whether a little or a lot, for our society, that has so many needs. It's the only way we can meet these needs. (53 years old, volunteer)

#### ***Hypothesis 4: Men and Women Conceive of Their Commitment Based on Recognizing the Needs of Others***

Recognizing the needs of others by individuals generates a sense of commitment among men and women in the same way that identifying the existence of different kinds of needy sectors of the population becomes a stimulus for active participation. At the same time, there is a certain concern about people's indifference in the face of something that is evident to the person who helps. Hence, even though the participants in volunteer activities devote time and material resources to these tasks, they insist that this is insufficient, given the magnitude of the problems detected.

**Men:** ...it commits me more, as well as when I'm at home sitting in the armchair watching TV, since I imagine that there are needy people and that the work we do is important... and that we can't give up... And if other do it... can't we? (34 years old, volunteer)

...I think it's with us from birth, for most of my brothers and sisters and me, helping people who need it; that's mainly the passion for soccer, the passion for helping others, and the passion for teaching people. (43 years old, volunteer director)

**Women:** I haven't dedicated myself to a single cause as such; I've always tried to help where it's needed, in homes, orphanages, the church, the DIF, etc. (53 years old, director)

...it makes you feel impotent, because you don't have enough time to do everything you want to do and everything you see needs to be done, and you don't have enough money to cover all the needs either, so all of that weighs on you a lot and it's very exasperating. (34 years old, coordinator and volunteer)

#### ***Hypothesis 5: Men and Women Define the Deficiencies that Promote Volunteer Participation Differently***

When the participants in volunteer activities define the deficiencies faced by others, they do so in contrast with how they perceive themselves. In the case of men, a concern and social responsibility to attenuate social differences through commitment and participation in different actions is observed. In the case of women, this seems to be focused on a moral responsibility that everyone should assume.

**Men:** ... I think that a deficiency in what is most needed in this country is to support people without resources. People do not have anything and, well, try to awaken in them a little the idea that they should play sports and study, because that is the only way the situation in this country is going to change. This is something that I am convinced of, that the only way to change the situation in this country is through education and sports. There is no other way, is there? That is the situation. (43 years old, director and founder)

It makes me, uh... like that... sad to see that they can't and I feel that I'm complete... and if I don't help them, there's no one who will, you know? I'm a complete person and I help people who face **deficiencies**... (21 years old, volunteer)

**Woman:** I think we should all participate for society, because there's a great deficiency, a great deal of selfless cooperation is needed. We should not just work when we get paid, but work giving whatever time we have, whether a little or a lot, for our society, that has so many needs. It's the only way we can meet these needs... (52 years old, volunteer)

### ***Hypothesis 6: The Ethical Vision of the Objectives Pursued by Volunteer Activities Is Shared by Men and Women***

The influence of religious values is evident in the participant's representations of the actions they develop in regard to what must be done to affect and transform the inequalities and needs of others. The desire to improve the situation of those in difficulty is often linked to the religious conviction that a better world is possible and desirable. However, it should be pointed out that this is more often the case with women than with men.

**Man:** Knowing that Jesus Christ had always, had always, uh, distinguished himself as being on the side of the poor, of the needy, of the sick, of those who needed something from Him, well, then I come to the parish with the idea of, well, helping the most needy. (58 years old, volunteer founder)

**Woman:** Look, I think we're just passing through this life and that we have to do something with our lives, something meaningful, something for others, something [that] makes our lives worth living, and what better than loving one's neighbor. Especially when you consider that you're in a position where you have been very privileged and have received many blessings, and that is when I most feel the commitment that I have to share with others. (45 year-old woman, volunteer founder)

### **Hypothesis 7: Participation in Volunteer Activities Is Valued in Subjective and Not Economic Terms Among Men and Women**

Participants in volunteer activities establish subjective parameters for evaluating what they do, such as personal satisfaction, the pleasure of doing it, without expecting any type of economic compensation. For the group interviewed, this is, again, an ethical and emotional matter.

**Men:** I'm very happy with what I do; it is very fulfilling, because I know it has a big impact. There are definitely people for each thing. (32 years old, volunteer)

Well, I like it, because it makes me feel very good personally, not because of what they'll say. I don't expect to receive a prize or payment. It's a personal satisfaction for me. (56 years old, volunteer coordinator)

**Woman:** Why do you do it? Not for anything in particular, just for the pleasure of doing it. I love children. (53 years old, volunteer)

### ***Hypothesis 8: Those Interviewed “Feel” Differently About Belonging to a Group of Volunteers Based on Their Gender***

There are significant differences between men and women in the expressions about belonging or being part of a group. Women tend to explicitly define their participation as something ingrained, as religious-type beliefs, while among men there is constant reference to social responsibility and commitment.

**Men:** I feel that my role has been as a symbol of unity or of calling on others to resolve conflicts or develop more organized work. It's like my role has been to make sure the process isn't interrupted. I invite the others to be tolerant, although we all make mistakes, including me. (45 years old, volunteer founder)

First I came to do tasks, one, two, three, as a volunteer and then as an associate. I started to enjoy the work and saw that it was nice thing to work in the community. (73 years old, volunteer)

**Women:** So, I don't know why other people don't like it, that is to say, I like it, because I feel I'm serving God, you understand? That's why I like it. And I don't know, I mean, I don't know why, you know? But I like it! ...They say that people don't thank me, and that's true! I mean, I see that, but I say: I don't care about the people; I do it with love for God and as a service to God. And it's the only thing I tell him, you know? (41 years old, volunteer organizer)

Some work was started with these kids, why not continue? And on the other hand, I had something in me, like... in my relationship with God, for example, that I've been trying to have, it was like something that God was telling me, talking to me, about your mission in life. Those kinds of things... Well, I don't know. At the beginning it was like... hmmm, I don't know. I can tell you in one word and I can explain it to you. I think that it is God's will for my life, that's it, definitely. (49 years old, volunteer)

The hypotheses for each group of statements in this breakdown let us see very clearly how volunteers define their activities: an act of giving, helping, and supporting others due to a personal and subjective interest, due to the pleasure of doing it and the satisfaction the person doing it receives. It is equally clear that social and moral responsibility is always present. Men are inclined more towards the social aspect, while women relate themselves above all in terms of a moral and ethical commitment. All of this is within an evident framework of recognition, on the part of participants, of the profound inequalities for broad groups of the population and of the severe challenges that we as a society face in Mexico.

## Conclusions

In this text, the process followed by both the members of volunteer groups and those who work for non-profit organizations has been analyzed, in order to examine activities involving help for third parties. It was clear that, when entering into these kinds of activities, they acquired a commitment to the organizations where they participate and that this is due, in large measure, to previous experiences in their family of origin. It is also related to specific events that occur at different points during their lives. The reasons their commitment remains active and the type of activities they undertake as volunteers was also analyzed. It was possible to observe that, for the set of 66 in-depth interviews conducted; women devote themselves to volunteer activities more than men, with a ratio of 3:1.

It was also possible to discover that those who become involved as volunteers include both retired women and housewives, as well as other people, both men and women, who are also engaged in economic activity, which is where their income comes from, and dedicate part of their time to helping third parties that are not necessarily related to their family or group of relatives. They are people at a productive age who coordinate and divide their responsibilities between work, volunteer activity, and their families. This finding demystifies the popular misconception that volunteers are essentially women from the middle classes who devote themselves to works of charity to fill their idle moments.

We are dealing here with people that have a commitment to others, expressed in the continuity of their actions, the time dedicated to this kind of activity, and the expectation that they will continue on the same path. When going deeper into the general characteristics of those interviewed, I found that they could be separated into two large groups or types. One is the group of full-time volunteers over a specific period, which we can call "intense volunteers," as Verduzco indicates in this book, and the second group is made up of people with a definite and specific commitment in terms of the time dedicated to these activities, that we can call "systematic volunteers."

With regard to the reasons why people join in these kinds of activities, we find that the family plays a predominate role, since it is at home where the subject receives the values and principles that will be put into practice in adult life. In other cases, social concerns are also an important element for dedication to these activities. Therefore, a single pattern does not exist, but rather a framework of different elements is in play in the course of a subject's life that leads to showing concern to help others and that finally takes the form of joining a volunteer group among the organizations designed for this purpose. Motivations range from the convictions regarding the social differentiation that places an enormous contingent of people in a needy situation without the possibility of getting ahead on their own to those that have to do with moral issues, like protecting the helpless.



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