Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland

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QUEENSLAND STATE GOVERNMENT ENQUIRY: Volunteering in Queensland

"Enhancing the Skills and Knowledge of Volunteers in Participatory Community Development": Submission by Agora

Preamble:

Thank you for initiating this inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland and for accepting this submission from Agora Community Development. *https://www.agoracommunity.com.au/*

The founders of Agora Community Development, Beatrice (Bea) Rogan, Maria Tennant and Carmel Daveson AM, have been volunteers in diverse roles for many decades. Some of these roles are: governance at a local, regional, state, national and international level; mentoring and training other volunteers; chairing and or participating in not-for-profit or state advisory committees; undertaking research; and facilitating social change based on social justice principles.

1. Introduction:

Since the beginning of time, the social justice actions of people in their locality, or special interest groups have played a key role in shaping their communities. "The notion that any single individual endeavour could exist in isolation from others, is still relatively new–it is a byproduct of the West's focus on individualism in the early 19th century–and it is a fundamentally flawed concept. Diverse contexts across the centuries have taught something different: that individuals are integrally connected to everyone around us." (https://www.aluminati.net/communities) accessed 26/02/2025.

This submission highlights three major points (a) the limited concept of volunteering (b) the concept of 'active citizenship' being volunteers who come together to work with others to facilitate social change, in response to injustice, inequality, or unmet community needs and (c) critical need for volunteers, who engage in 'active citizenship', to access to low-cost training to gain the skills and knowledge of participatory community development. https://www.communitydevelopmentinstitute.com.au/ourdifference accessed 25/02/2025)

2. *Limited Concept of Volunteering*

Most people or organisations view a volunteer as someone who works for an organization without being paid or someone who does something, willingly for someone else without being forced to do it.

This definition does not acknowledge the significant contribution of a person who joins with others to shape and strengthen our society. Some of these roles would be in: Governance; Advocacy WITH others'; Advisory Committees; the Voice of people with 'lived experience' in informing policy change; or working with others in a range of diverse sectors eg arts, health, environment, education, and human services. These people are the backbone of community organisations with a deep commitment to the well-being of others.

3. Concept of Active Citizenship

"Active citizenship is about getting involved in your local community and displaying values such as respect, inclusion, and helping others". (https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/citizenship/celebrating-citizenship/active-citizen) accessed 25/02/2025.

Active Citizenship can also be understood as civic participation and people who are agents of social change. These individuals come together and facilitate change based on social justice principles. They are unpaid **leaders, changemakers, and community builders**. Their work creates **long-term social impact**, strengthening democracy, fostering inclusion, and ensuring that communities can advocate for their own needs and aspirations.

A selection of many websites provides these examples:

I. "The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised how volunteers as agents of change provide the practical action that builds hope and resilience, improves lives and strengthens communities." https://www.iave.org/iavewp/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Volunteerism-and-Community-Resilience-Locally-Owned-Solutions-Delivering-Impact.pdf (accessed 24/02/2025)

II. United Nations Volunteers (UNV), drawing on the 2002 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution 56/38 on Recommendations on support for Volunteering, defines volunteering as "a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor." (https://knowledge.unv.org/system/files/2024-04/57151-UNV-CBA-study-web_final) accessed 23/02/2025

III. "In 2022, the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment (OCSE) released a background report on the ACT's environmental volunteers. The report highlights that the contributions of volunteers are vast and varied. Many have extremely

high levels of expertise in a range of ecological and land management subjects — bringing skills and experiences from their professional careers into the volunteer realm". "Environmental volunteering provides a range of important values including enhanced wellbeing, positive environmental outcomes, economic benefits and increased scientific knowledge" (https://www.actsoe2023.com.au/issues/community-leadership/) accessed 25/02/2025

4.The Right to Access Training

Participatory Community Development is both a "citizen and professional practice. Not either/or". This statement can be found on the Community Development Institute website. (https://www.communitydevelopmentinstitute.com.au/ourdifference) Accessed 10/12/2-23

Acknowledging this definition, then *people engaged in active citizenship should also access training in participatory community development.* Some volunteers only need "to know about" other volunteers may be interested in skill development, that is "learning to do". Grants to enable this training are very scarce if not, non-existent.

5. Recommendations for the Inquiry

I.   **Expand and Value the Definition of Volunteering as Active Citizenship–** Recognise that the concept of volunteering includes small groups of community people coming together to facilitate: social change based on social justice principles; leadership; governance; advocacy; and grassroots activism.
II. **Access to Training through Investing in People-Led Change** – Provide resources, training, coaching, and structural support for volunteers engaged in facilitating social change based on social justice principles.
III. **Promote Active Citizenship** – Encourage broader recognition of volunteering as an essential part of civic engagement and democracy.

6.Final Statement

The foundation of robust connected communities lies in volunteering. Volunteering should not be limited to those providing direct, unpaid services but should encompass all forms of collective action aimed at addressing social injustices, inequality, and unmet community needs. By expanding the definition, we recognize the importance of volunteers who work towards long-term social change and highlight the value of their efforts in shaping a fairer, more just society. This broader view would also encourage a wider range of community-driven efforts, ensuring that various forms of volunteerism—whether local, national, or global—are recognized and valued equally.

The co-founders of Agora Community Development emphasise the importance of recognizing volunteers as catalysts for social change and needing access to skill development training in participatory community development. These people possess lived experiences and unite with a shared objective, collaborating to establish trusting relationships whilst identifying mutual goals. Together, they plan, organize, and facilitate social change based in social justice principles.

If the concept is broadened and training is accessed, then volunteerism becomes a tool for both direct assistance and systemic transformation, advancing the cause of social justice for all.