

## **The social and economic benefits of older people actively contributing to community capacity and ways in which ICT can enable this to happen.**

### *An ActiveAge Discussion Paper*

#### **Introduction**

‘Community capacity’ describes the ability of a community to achieve things for itself or to make the changes it desires. It is therefore a total of all the skills and capabilities, physical assets and social capital that lie within a community contributing to its economic prosperity, wellbeing and overall sustainability.

In this paper the potential for increasing the contribution of older people to their community’s capacity - through innovative technology solutions - will be discussed. Particular attention will be paid to volunteering in its loosest form, as this is one of the most common terms used to describe how older people contribute to their communities.

*“Community capacity is the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the wellbeing of that community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized efforts by individuals, organizations, and social networks that exist among them and between them and the larger systems of which the community is part”<sup>1</sup>*

Although there can be many assets within a community creating a substantial amount of potential capacity, this capacity can often lie untapped. It would seem that for ‘community capacity’ to be beneficial something else is required. The second half of Chaskin’s definition commencing, *“It may be operated through...”* implies that something further is required for existent capacity to ‘work’ for the benefit of the community.

Capacity needs to be activated by individuals or groups within the community or by other entities outside the community. This involves ‘active citizenship’ on the part of individuals, which means people within the community taking an active role, participating, volunteering or campaigning with others for the good of the community.

It is important to note that active citizenship is not necessarily linked with participation in the labour market and, specifically for older people it has a

strong connection with volunteering<sup>2</sup>. To encourage active citizenship, the preparedness of individuals to take a leading role to make things happen is crucially important. Organisations outside the community, such as local authorities or the third sector may need to provide support to communities who lack strong leadership. Support may be required to help build capacity, where none exists, or to identify capacity that lies dormant and could be activated to meet various needs.

Community capacity is inextricably linked to the amount of ‘social capital’ that exists within a given community, that being the “...features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives... Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust”<sup>3</sup>

Social capital is a result of citizens playing an active role in their communities. Prof. Robert Putnam, one of the key authors on the subject, places specific emphasis on people taking part in formal and informal organisations, such as neighbourhood associations, sports clubs, choral societies, and mass-based political parties, at a local and regional community level.

*ActiveAge* believes that older people, because of their skills, knowledge and life experience have a vital role to play in contributing to and building upon already existing community capacity and enhancing social capital. This is echoed in various studies:

*“The potential capacity among older people for organising activities at the local level resulting in active ageing and community participation has never been greater. This is because of the steady growth and spread of communication technologies among the older population, such as mobile phones, email and community websites”<sup>4</sup>*

Many older people have a wealth of skills that can benefit the local community but this doesn’t always happen, despite a willingness to act and contribute. Not knowing how best or where to add their contribution may be the problem and in other instances, a suitable mechanism for participation is not available. This suggests a clear role for the state or other organisations to provide mechanisms for ‘active citizenship’, to identify and match older people’s skills and knowledge against community needs.

The International Longevity Centre’s paper *Unlocking the Community* suggests the role of the state for untapping the potential of older people may vary as follows:

- Ensuring the capacity of older people to organize in local communities is used
- Sparking the creation of community networks and groups that provide opportunities for active ageing and social participation
- Ensuring community activities reach out to more isolated individuals who would potentially benefit more from engagement by the local community

<sup>2</sup> J. Wheelock, M. Lie, S. Baines, 2008. [Citizenship, volunteering and active ageing](#)

<sup>3</sup> R. Putnam, 1995. [Bowling Alone](#)

<sup>4</sup> S. Goodenough, International Longevity Centre, 2007. [Unlocking the Community](#)

It is not only the state that has a role to play in enhancing community capacity by supporting older people. Care homes and other care settings will have to consider ways of enabling residents with varying degrees of ability and mobility to continue to contribute to, and interact with, the wider community and society.

Those in charge of these settings will need to develop convenient mechanisms to make this possible.

### **The value older people can offer their communities**

There is widespread recognition of the value *for* older people in contributing to society - the focus being on reducing the ‘loneliness, *boredom, isolation and depression*’ that ‘*continues to characterize the lives of many older people*’<sup>5</sup>.

The benefits for the older person of contributing to society are regularly highlighted within the European Union where there is a focus on *Active Ageing*. The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes the latter as “*the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age*”<sup>6</sup>.

Promoting the benefits of participation in society solely for the older person may be perceived as being slightly needy and patronising, resulting in older people feeling more of a burden rather than an asset.

More could and should be said about the potential for society of untapping the skills and knowledge of older people for the benefit of their communities, which would inevitably increase social and human capital.

In the UK the significance of older people’s contributions is being recognised, specifically as a means of developing alternative public services; utilizing the skills of older people for the benefit of older people. For example, the government recently announced £1 million has been made available for the ‘*Active at 60 Community Agent*’ initiative. This scheme has made money available for local community groups in 30 selected areas.

Groups are being encouraged to hire an ‘*Active at 60 Agent*’ who will volunteer their time to motivate, encourage and organise people within their community to be more active, physically, socially and mentally. Agents will do a number of things including:

- helping people take their first steps in trying something new
- helping people understand the benefits they can get from being more active, engaged and contributing to their communities
- building social contacts to help make being active part of a routine

The programme is part of the government’s *Big Society* agenda in which power and responsibility is to be transferred to local communities, organisations and voluntary groups, to play a greater role.

<sup>5</sup> ibdn

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organisation (WHO), 2002. [Active Ageing: a policy framework](http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/active/en/index.html), downloaded from <http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/active/en/index.html>

'Upstream' is another project, which was set up to encourage older people in rural Devon to support one another thereby increasing capacity within their communities and reducing the reliance on external support services. The project began in 2001 when a group of GPs recognised that older people needed help to form supportive networks for mutual benefit.

*"Feeling isolated is a common problem among the elderly. It can often lead to a downward spiral whereby people begin to feel depressed and suffer other mental health problems. This causes them to rely more heavily on health and social care services"*<sup>7</sup>

The project had the specific objective of *'engaging socially isolated and vulnerable individuals before they are caught in a spiral of ill-health, depression and dependency'*<sup>8</sup>. An example of how the project works can be seen in the farming village of Witheridge where eight women have been getting together each week to take part in activities including painting, writing and photography classes.

Successes that have resulted from *Upstream* can be seen in its recognition by various bodies. It has been identified as an example of good practice by national, regional, and local government, by the NHS and Primary Care Trusts and by a range of national and regional organisations<sup>9</sup>. For more on evaluation of the project you can visit their website which includes feedback on the psychological, social, health, and other benefits experienced by older people.

*Participle* is an organisation aiming to innovate and develop alternatives to state run public services for older people, and others. For older people this is being achieved through the development of mechanisms that allow people to help one another. The *Participle Circle* project started with the Southwark Circle, *'a membership organisation that helps people take care of household tasks, forge social connections and find new directions in life'*.<sup>10</sup> The Circles model is now being viewed as an alternative to future services in the UK.

With all 3 projects above the focus is on the inclusion of vulnerable and isolated older individuals who are a government priority because of the increasing burden on health and social care if they become dependent on the state. The language used in describing these projects focuses on preventing loneliness and isolation and building inclusion. Not as much is said about the benefits older people bring to their communities in terms of their knowledge, skills and life experience.

Less consideration is given to the means of connecting people where face-to-face contact is not possible because of mobility problems or other health-related issues or where the older person has limited time to offer. ActiveAge believe that technology could offer ways of extending connections amongst older people, and between older people and the rest of their communities, increasing community capacity by linking people in flexible and convenient ways.

<sup>7</sup> Local Government Improvement and Development, <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8042364>

<sup>8</sup> ibdn

<sup>9</sup> Upstream project website, <http://www.upstream-uk.com/What-is-Upstream.html>

<sup>10</sup> Participle website <http://www.participle.net/projects/view/5/101/>

## **Volunteering**

Although there is no standard definition of volunteering it has been construed as:

*“... An activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives”<sup>11</sup>*

It has been said of the voluntary and community sector that, *“... It is the invisible glue that holds society together, builds social capital and empowers individuals to make a difference in people’s lives...”<sup>12</sup>*

Although there are many ways people are active within their communities, volunteering is probably the most widely used term in everyday language to describe how people contribute to society outside of the workplace.

It is used with reference to various activities done by older people who have retired from the traditional workplace but are still active in other spheres of society *‘...volunteering is intimately – but for older people, ambivalently – linked with the ideas of active citizenship’<sup>13</sup>*.

The benefits of volunteering for older people flow in two directions i) a benefit for the community in which the older person participates and ii) a benefit for the older person who remains active and feels valued by those he/she helps. EU policies give specific emphasis to encouraging volunteering to promote the social inclusion of older people.<sup>14</sup>

The term should, however, be used with caution. In everyday discourse people often only consider themselves to be *volunteering* when the activity is formal and organised through a third party.

Volunteering has far more rigid connotations than words such as ‘contributing’, ‘participating’ or ‘taking part’. These three words could equally be used to describe things older people do that have a positive impact on their community’s capacity and have great value for both volunteer and recipient. For example, the UK Census (2001) showed that 4, 000 people aged 90 or over provided 50 hours or more of unpaid care per week to another family member or friend. In addition to caring, contributions made by older people include providing leadership, taking part in political activity, holding family identities, culture and heritage and passing these on to younger generations (Riseborough 1998).

Often people don’t recognise these types of activities as volunteering but they are activities that enhance community capacity and promote social capital.

Many of the British Government’s statements on volunteering highlight the rewards that can be enjoyed by volunteers themselves more than the contributions they make to the wellbeing of others in society. *ActiveAge* believes that more emphasis should be placed on the latter.

<sup>11</sup> Volunteering England, 2010. [An investment case for volunteering: submission to the spending review](#)

<sup>12</sup> J. Wheelock, M. Lie, S. Baines, 2008. [Citizenship, volunteering and active ageing](#)

<sup>13</sup> ibdn

<sup>14</sup> Eurofound, 2010. [Measures for Social Inclusion of the Elderly: the case for volunteering](#)

Volunteering is often promoted by the state as a route into paid work by building skills and knowledge for those who need to acquire them, hence the reward for the volunteer. However, research based in the North East of England - summarised in a paper *'Citizenship, Volunteering and Active Ageing'* - suggests that older people enjoy the freedom and flexibility of volunteering, valuing the option to choose how and where they devote their time. Volunteering should be flexible and *not* 'work-like'.

The incentive for older people to volunteer is driven by more personal reasons than skill accumulation such as *'...enjoyment, intrinsic rewards, sociability and personal fulfilment'*<sup>15</sup>.

This research suggested older people are willing to act for the benefit of others without the state intervening to give them motivation and putting their slant on why it is important, *'to support public services, build and deliver a Big Society and develop skills and employability'*<sup>16</sup>. These are promoted by *Volunteer England* as the main ways volunteering contributes to government and society. But the research mentioned above found that, *"the strong commitment to society and fellow citizens among older people counter-balances individualistic and instrumental reasons for volunteering promoted by the state and market"*<sup>17</sup>

As volunteering is one of the main ways older people perceive themselves as active citizens, it is important to keep the label 'volunteering' broad. Research has shown people often struggle to identify their activities as 'volunteering', *"Despite agreeing what the universal attributes of volunteering were, when considering their own activities, participants had difficulty identifying them as volunteering"*<sup>18</sup>.

This implies that definitions of volunteering are quite narrow. If volunteering is only seen as activity formally organised by a third party this excludes many activities undertaken on an individual basis i.e. helping a neighbour and puts barriers in place for innovative thinking about ways in which individuals can give time to benefit their communities. The greater the breadth of activities considered to be volunteering, the more opportunity there is for creative thinking about ways in which people can get involved.

### **Technology Innovation for Volunteering**

A programme launched this year by the mobile phone network Orange demonstrates how companies are starting to innovate with technology for volunteering. *Mobile Volunteering* aims to develop flexible and convenient ways for people to volunteer. Orange are using the phrase *'snack-sized volunteering'* to describe what they are trying to achieve by allowing people to use mobile phones to help those who need help, so releasing extra hours of volunteering in the UK.

The project was launched with a website<sup>19</sup> which is being used to attract new ideas and concepts on ways to achieve mobile volunteering.

<sup>15</sup> J. Wheelock, M. Lie, S. Baines, 2008. [Citizenship, volunteering and active ageing](#)

<sup>16</sup> Volunteering England, [An investment case for volunteering: submission to the Spending Review](#)

<sup>17</sup> J. Wheelock, M. Lie, S. Baines, 2008 [Citizenship, volunteering and active ageing](#)

<sup>18</sup> C. Reilly, Research and Development Officer, Volunteer Development Scotland, [Something others do: applying personal experience to established definitions of volunteering](#)

<sup>19</sup> Orange website, Mobile Volunteering, <http://www.mobilevolunteering.co.uk/>

The top ten suggested methods will be developed and funded by Orange, with the aim of producing the ultimate volunteering application.

Some of the suggestions so far include a bullying support service, identifying derelict sites for environmental makeover, assisting underprivileged individuals with language translation, sharing information about missing persons and there are many more ideas on the website.

Orange's mobile volunteering programme could easily be tailored to communities and used by older people and others to increase community capacity in their locality in a flexible and convenient way. The project demonstrates the breadth and depth of what could be considered as volunteering and how doing a little can help others.

'*Slivers of Time Volunteering*' is another innovative project, being promoted by the social enterprise, Slivers-of-Time Limited.

The company emerged from a government-funded programme to design and deliver technology to make local labour markets more flexible, serving local authorities, primary care trusts, housing associations and other private sector employers.

The company deals with the market of spare hours individuals have. Available hours are matched with the needs of employers in the local area. This benefits local employers and creates new work opportunities for individuals.

In terms of voluntary activity this allows for more flexibility, in the same way it does for traditional work. *Slivers of Time* allows volunteers to list how far they are willing to travel, how much notice they need, what tasks they are permitted to do, who they most like volunteering with and what the maximum number of hours per week are.

This is all done on a secure access website. The *Slivers of Time* model is said to be ideal for 'periods of companionship, shopping, trips out and other quality of life issues'<sup>20</sup>.

This is a simple and novel way of putting the volunteer in charge of how much they want to do and where they want to do it.

*Slivers of Time* is an approach that *ActiveAge* believes makes sense. It views volunteering and labour hours as a market, which increases flexibility for the employer and the employee and allows for individual lifestyle choices.

### **Technology innovation for the inclusion of older people**

Recent research commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation identified ICT as, "...a means to enable older people to renew and develop social contacts and engage actively in their communities"<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Slivers of Time website, Volunteering, [http://www.slivers.com/what\\_we\\_do/volunteering.html](http://www.slivers.com/what_we_do/volunteering.html)

<sup>21</sup> Independent Age, commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Older People, Technology and Community

This work identified benefits of using technology, not just for the older person but also for the community in which they live, concluding that technology provides opportunities to:

- Participate in meaningful work and other activities
- Interact in new ways with friends and family
- Learn, develop skills and gather experience
- Share learning skills and experiences with others<sup>22</sup>

The focus on the benefits of ICT for older people, “*it can help prevent older people from becoming socially isolated and lonely because of life changes including retirement, bereavement and deterioration of health. And it can help those who are socially isolated to escape their situation*”<sup>23</sup>, reflect the wider focus on the benefits of volunteering for older people as discussed above.

It has been shown that participating in online communities can have an impact on an older person(s) ‘*sense of community*’. The latter has been identified as a key element of community capacity. Sense of community ‘*reflects a degree of connectedness among members and a recognition of mutuality of circumstance, including a threshold level of collectively held values, norms and vision*’.<sup>24</sup> When this exists in a community it is associated with various positive outcomes, including ‘*empowerment, sense of efficacy, life satisfaction, improved well-being and happiness*’.<sup>25</sup>

A University of Sydney study explored how older adults’ Internet use affects their sense of community and wellbeing. It was said that ‘*online communication presents many new opportunities for a sense of community without regular face-to-face communication*’<sup>26</sup>. This is likely to be positive, not just for the older person, but for whoever he/she is interacting with online. There are likely to be benefits for others within the community who wouldn’t otherwise have contact with the older person(s).

The study found that overall there was ‘*a positive sense of association between a sense of belonging to an online community, sense of community and well-being*’.<sup>27</sup>

Online communities that include older people may also result in increased levels of social capital within the physical community in which they are part. This results from fostering greater networks of trust and reciprocity among people, who would otherwise be excluded, and active members of the community, ‘*use of email chatrooms and notice boards in particular communities result in stronger ties between community members offline*’<sup>28</sup>.

By enabling older people to share their skills and knowledge in a flexible way this increases the human capital within a community, that being the stock of competencies, knowledge and personal skills within a community. This is another important aspect of community capacity.

<sup>22</sup> ibdn

<sup>23</sup> Independent Age, Older People, Technology and Community

<sup>24</sup> Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, Vidal, 2001. Building Community Capacity

<sup>25</sup> S. Sum, R.M. Mathews, M. Pourghasem, I. Hughes, 2009. Internet Use as a Predictor of Sense of Community in Older People, CyberPsychology & Behaviour vol. 1, No 2

<sup>26</sup> ibdn

<sup>27</sup> ibdn

<sup>28</sup> Independent Age, Older People, technology and community

The study commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation also highlights technology as a means of older people sharing their learning and skills with others. However, the focus of this still seems to be on alleviating social isolation and loneliness for the older person and not on the abundance of knowledge, skills and experience older people have that could be shared for the benefit of the community.

### **Barriers for technology use**

It is important to note that before any benefits can be gained from technology one must recognise and address the various barriers older people face when using technology. These have been well researched and recited elsewhere - suffice to say, some of the main barriers include:

- Lack of access to the internet
- Inappropriate design
- Low awareness of the benefits of technology
- Anxiety about trying something unknown
- Inadequate marketing

As discussed above, projects such as Orange's *Mobile Volunteering* don't require people to learn how to use a computer or get a broadband connection. Mobile phones may be a means of encouraging greater numbers of older people to get involved in their communities with little effort or additional cost - if they already have a phone they regularly use.

Ofcom figures from 2006 show that while nearly 50% of people over 65 have a mobile phone, only 20% have the Internet in their home.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, using mobile phones to develop volunteering projects seems to be a sensible way of overcoming some of the technology barriers associated with lack of Internet access and additional cost.

In terms of some of the other barriers, these are being addressed to varying degrees by the government, academia and by some innovative companies. For example, Broadband Computing Co<sup>30</sup> has developed *Alex*, which comes with a suite of simple and practical programmes available on screen at the touch of a button. Alex is a subscription model package for your PC, which means the subscriber does not need to worry about maintenance, anti virus packages or being updated with the latest software.

*Maavis*<sup>31</sup> is another simplified computing package that allows access to media, communications, and web programs. It has been designed primarily for people who are unsure of computers or unable to use them without adaptation. *Maavis* was developed by Sheffield University as a research project investigating technology use by people with dementia living in a care environment.

Among the companies to address the barriers faced by older people getting online is Microsoft Corporation. Further information on Microsoft's Senior PC Project can be found on the *ActiveAge* website under the case studies<sup>32</sup> tab.

<sup>29</sup> Ofcom, 2006. [Media Literacy Audit: report on media literacy among older people](#)

<sup>30</sup> Broadband Computing website, <http://www.welcometoalex.com/page/index.cfm>

<sup>31</sup> Maavis website, <http://maavis.fullmeasure.co.uk/>

<sup>32</sup> ActiveAge website, <http://www.activeage.org/case-studies?start=3>

## Conclusions

The benefits of engaging older people in society and their communities are two-fold. Firstly there are advantages for the older person; keeping mentally and socially active and bolstering their health and wellbeing by mitigating the risk of loneliness and isolation in old age.

Secondly, there are benefits for society, which are not as readily highlighted. Older people have a vast amount of skills, knowledge and life experience, which can be used for the benefit of their communities, enhancing and building community capacity.

The economic incentives come from the potential of older people to contribute to the provision of alternative public services, which are needed because of the rapidly ageing population. Whilst older people bring financial advantages to society, contributing '*230 billion pounds as paid workers; £5 billion as volunteers and £4 billion as grandparents*'<sup>33</sup>, the future will bring huge problems in funding and the delivery of public services. The demand for care is already starting to outstrip supply and this trend will increase in coming years.

Organisations such as Participle and projects such as Upstream (mentioned above) both offer innovation in alternative service provision mechanisms, utilizing the skills and attributes of older people to build self-sustaining networks of support.

What seems to get less consideration is the issue of what happens when individuals are less mobile, live in residential care or would prefer to contribute from the comfort of their own homes. Regardless of where a person lives, in supported accommodation or independently at home, there should be opportunities for every individual to remain involved with the wider community and society.

As highlighted in this paper, mobile companies such as Orange are looking at innovative solutions for volunteering, which seem to broaden the remit of what most people consider to be volunteering. In addition, many academics and some businesses are looking at ways to make technology more accessible for older people and overcome the barriers to use.

It is *ActiveAge's* belief that more innovation would be likely to occur if attitudes and mindsets altered. Rather than seeing older people as needy individuals who we must make every effort to include in society in order to reduce the burden of care, we should be looking at their skills and knowledge as a huge asset, and finding ways and innovative solutions to encourage and harness the potential of their wider participation.

<sup>33</sup> Participle Website, <http://www.participle.net/projects/view/5/101/>

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