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Informal volunteering and community-led problem-solving

Professor Carolyn M. Hendriks[1], Associate Professor Elise Klein[2] and Dr Sue Regan[3]

Key Insights

- Informal volunteering – broadly defined as unpaid, voluntary work not coordinated by an organization or institution – is widespread, but not well understood. Policy and practice settings that might support informal volunteering are correspondingly weak.
- Informal volunteering provides people – especially the young and more marginalised – with flexible opportunities to contribute their time when they can, and how they can, without the commitments, norms and training attached to volunteering via a formal organisation.
- Current definitions of informal volunteering include a broad range of sporadic and spontaneous activities from assisting a friend, through to engaging in mutual aid efforts, right through to participating in a social or political cause.
- This paper focuses in on a particular kind of informal volunteering that occurs in 'community-led initiatives' where people self-organise to work on a collective problem. Studies find that community-led initiatives offer highly practical and experimental solutions to complex policy issues. However, further research is needed on how to best support and resource informal volunteers in these collective problem-solving efforts.
- Frameworks and guidelines are needed to encourage more responsive and inclusive community-led problem solving. In developing policy and practice settings, care should be taken not to stifle the informality, responsiveness, creativity and agency of community-led initiatives.
- The National Strategy for Volunteering needs to: a) highlight the limitations of current definitions of informal volunteering; b) recognise the distinctive collective problem-solving work of informal volunteers in community-led initiatives; and c) highlight the need for future research and policy development on community-led initiatives, particularly the motivations and activities of their informal volunteers, and how their efforts interface with formal civil society organisations and government.

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Introduction

Support, advocacy and recognition for volunteers in Australia primarily centres on volunteering in formal organisations, such as registered charities. Yet many Australians also volunteer in more informal ways for example by contributing their time to support a social, economic or environmental cause, or participating in a community project or cultural activity. Around the world scholars and practitioners are increasingly using the umbrella term 'informal volunteering' to capture a wide variety volunteering activities that occur outside formal organisations, ranging from assisting a friend, through to mutual aid efforts, right through to informal modes of social action and political participation. Informal volunteering can be sporadic and spontaneous[4] or it can span several years; it can emerge in online and in-person environments.[5]

Informal volunteering tends to fly 'beneath the radar' of organisations supporting, representing and regulating volunteering in Australia. The true size and contributions of informal volunteering to Australian society are not well understood, nor are the perspectives and needs of informal volunteers. Data, however, is difficult to collect because informal volunteering is so broadly defined and challenging to measure and track. It can potentially include a vast array of activities from neighbourly kindness and support through to participating in community activities and social action. Without fully understanding the size and extent of informal volunteering, the contributions of informal volunteers are rendered "invisible"[6], and thus not fully socially valued in discussions and policies on volunteering.[7] This has important consequences for social inclusion given that people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, recent migrants and First Nations people are more likely to volunteer informally than formally.[8]

This paper aims to inform the new National Strategy for Volunteering in Australia about a particular kind of informal volunteering focussed around practical problem-solving. Volunteering of this kind typically occurs in 'community-led initiatives' where people give their time to participate in local grassroots effort that offers practical solutions to a public problem, for example, by offering emergency relief in natural disasters, producing renewable energy or sustainable food, or delivering support or justice services to marginalised people. These kinds of bottom-up initiatives are not new, and diverse communities around the globe have long developed their own solutions to collective

4 e.g., Barraket et al., 2014.
5 e.g., McCosker et al., 2018; Woolvin et al., 2015; Groundwork UK, 2020.
6 Crittenden, 2019.
7 Dean, 2021.
8 CIRCA, 2016.

problems.[9] The past two decades have seen a particular increase in community-led initiatives across diverse sectors and countries, due to a mix of economic, technical, political and social forces[10] as communities 'step in' to fill gaps left by governments, markets or formal civil society organisations.

Australia has a rich history of community-led problem solving, for example, in the ancient cultures of the First Nations people, in the self-help and mutual aid efforts of early colonies, and in the community action during the war years.[11] Most recently we have seen communities quickly self-organise local initiatives to provide support and assistance to vulnerable people during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2019/20 bushfires and the 2022 NSW/QLD floods.[12] Many of these recent initiatives demonstrated the informal, relational and embedded ways that communities seek to solve problems, but in some cases these well-intended local efforts disrupted the frontline services of government and formal volunteering organisations. For example, during the Black Summer fires of 2019-20 many communities self-mobilised and created their own informal relief centres, but in some localities these came into tension with formal government recovery centres due to concerns about community safety and the provision of adequate trauma support.[13]

This paper argues that community-led initiatives demand particular attention in the National Strategy for Volunteering because they present opportunities and challenges to volunteers, communities and public policy. On the one hand local grassroots efforts have the capacity to generate innovative and effective solutions to complex contemporary issues, as recognised by global policy institutions.[14] Yet on the other hand community-led initiatives can also be sites where the state and market off-load collective responsibilities onto communities[15] and, if unregulated, can potentially exacerbate inequalities and competition within civil society.[16] Research and public policy attention is urgently needed to better support informal volunteers, particularly those engaging in community-led initiatives.

Defining informal volunteering

Informal volunteering has always existed in human societies. However, over the past two decades scholars have noted a global trend away from volunteering as a life-long

9 Mitlin, 2008; Ostrom, 1996.
10 Edelenbos et al., 2020.
11 see Oppenheimer & Regan, 2022.
12 e.g., ABC, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020.
13 CoA, 2020, p. 465.
14 e.g., OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2016.
15 Eliasoph, 2013.
16 Martinelli, 2013.

commitment to a church or civil society organisation towards more program-based and episodic modes of volunteering.[17] This shift is reflective of broader social transformations where people are seeking more flexible and adaptable ways to engage in social and political activities.[18]

Currently there is no standard definition of informal volunteering, nationally or internationally, and this makes it more challenging to generate knowledge on how best to support, recognise and regulate informal volunteering activities. Scholars of volunteerism typically define informal volunteering as "the giving of one's time, perhaps on an ad hoc basis, to help one's friends, neighbors[sic], or community".[19] In the 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report[20] informal volunteering is defined as activity that "occurs directly between individuals and communities without being mediated by an organization".

In Australia, the national peak body for volunteering, *Volunteering Australia,* defines informal volunteering as "time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain, taking place outside the context of a formal organization or group. This includes assisting people in the community, excluding one's own family members".[21] The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) uses a similar definition in its General Social Survey, defining informal volunteering as "the provision of unpaid work/support to non-household members, excluding that provided only to family members living outside the household".[22] The *Volunteering in Australia* research which is informing the development and implementation of the new National Strategy for Volunteering has adopted the same definition.

The size and significance of informal volunteering

According to the United Nations a larger proportion of people volunteer informally than formally. The 2022 State of World's Volunteerism Report found that globally more than twice as many people volunteer informally than formally, and the report notes that this is despite it being likely that informal volunteering is being underestimated due to the difficulties of data collection.[23] Data on the scale and nature of informal volunteering in Australia is limited. The ABS began collecting data on informal volunteering in 2019 via the General Social Survey (GSS). The 2020 GSS data revealed that over 6.511 million people aged 15 years and over provided informal volunteering support in their community

17 Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003; Cnaan et al., 2021.
18 Inglehart, 2018.
19 Dean, 2021, p. 528.
20 UNV, 2021, p. 33.
21 VA, 2022, p. 2.
22 ABS, 2019.
23 UNV, 2021.

in the four weeks prior to the survey. This is 32.1% of the population. The most common types of informal volunteering in 2020 according to the GSS were 'providing emotional support' (53.8%), 'providing transport and running errands' (38.2%), and 'domestic work, home maintenance or gardening' (37.2%).

Informal volunteering often spikes during crises. In natural disasters, it is common for people to spontaneously volunteer and help out in affected communities. In recent years, during fires and floods in Australia, efforts have been made by local government and peak volunteering bodies, to manage this influx of spontaneous volunteers to secure a more co-ordinated and effective emergency response.[24]

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, people around the globe have informally volunteered by co-ordinating or participating in various mutual aid groups and projects.[25] Reflecting on the hyper-local, spontaneous efforts that emerged during the UK's lockdown, Tiratelli and Kaye[26] found that:

> *These efforts do not reflect the traditional 'helper and helped' relationship, which prevails in public services and the formal charity sector. They obey the deeper obligations of mutualism: free citizens combining to protect their communities, and the most vulnerable, against a threat to all. ... 'Ordinary' people, not just those usually active in their town and village life, have stepped forward in astonishing numbers. Neighbourhoods have become more than geographies, but active social webs, linked by new connections and reciprocal dependencies.*

It is worth noting that the rate of informal volunteering in Australia was less strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than the rate of formal volunteering.[27] However, the resilience of informal volunteering during the pandemic is perhaps unsurprising; around Australia there was a surge in community-led efforts to support vulnerable people, most of these efforts were able to 'bypass' many of the restrictions imposed on formal volunteering. Data shows that informal volunteering in Australia tends to be more inclusive of certain groups than formal volunteering.[28] This trend is supported by early insights from the *Volunteering in Australia* research,[29] which finds that almost half of adults (46.5%) volunteered informally in the four weeks prior to the survey. Women and older Australians were more likely to have undertaken informal volunteering than men and younger Australians respectively. Those born overseas in a non-English speaking

24 e.g., McClennan et al., 2016 and see also https://volunteeringqld.org.au/services/spontaneous-volunteer-resources
25 UNV, 2021.
26 Tiratelli & Kaye, 2020 p. 5.
27 see ABS 2019, 2020.
28 CIRCA, 2016.
29 Biddle et al., 2022.

country were more likely to have undertaken informal volunteering than those born in Australia. Similar results are reported in other countries.[30]

Surveys, however, do not capture the full picture of informal volunteering. They are "potentially less likely to capture informal activities because people tend to forget them as ordinary bits of everyday life, things (one may assume) a survey would not be interested in".[31] Qualitative studies generate a more nuanced picture of the diverse activities that volunteers *do,* and reveal that over the course of one's life people move between various formal and informal volunteering activities. Indeed, volunteers themselves tend to view their volunteering practices and activities in more fluid terms than the dichotomy of what is labelled 'informal' and 'formal' volunteering.[32] A useful heuristic for capturing this more fluid understanding of volunteering is a 'spectrum of participation' with people engaging in diverse activities; some with informal, formal and mixed characteristics (see Figure 1). Overtime, people move between different kinds of activities as depicted by the arrows.

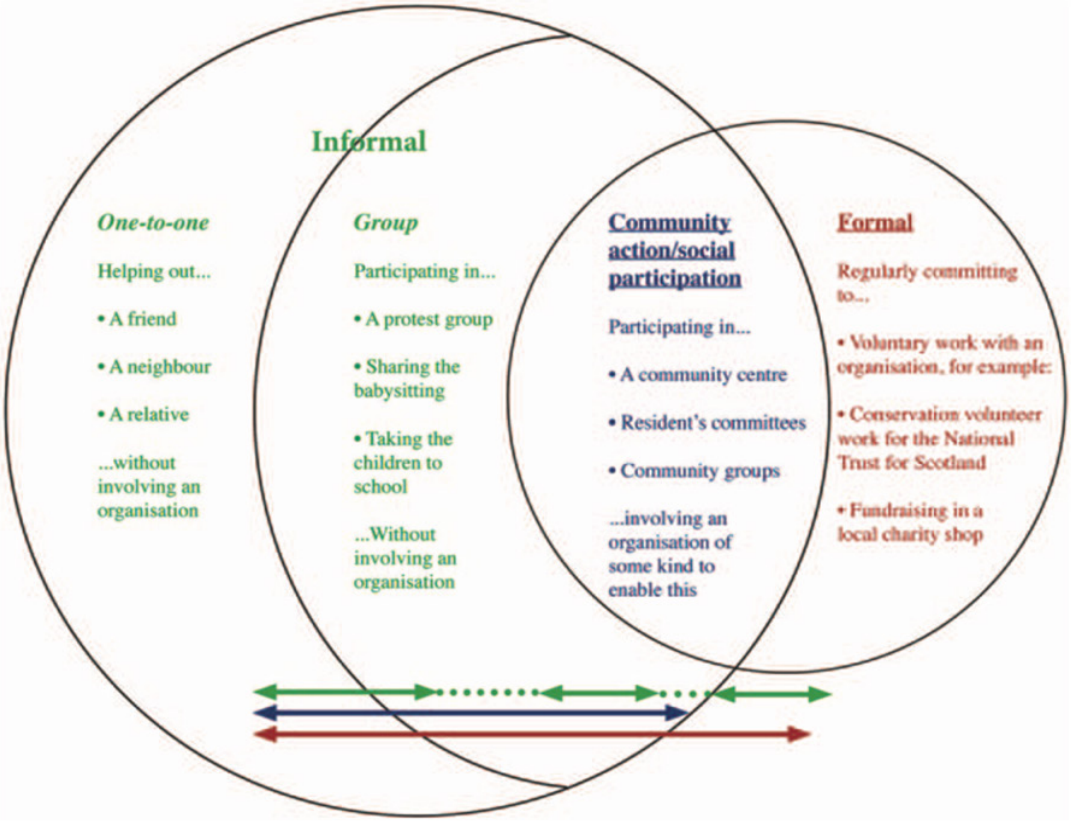

Figure 1: A 'spectrum' of participation over time[33]

30 e.g., Dean, 2021; Helms & McKenzie, 2014; Wang et al., 2017.
31 Dean, 2021, p. 529.
32 Woolvin et al., 2015.
33 Source: Woolvin & Hardhill, 2013.

Community-led initiatives: informal volunteering focussed on collective problem-solving

In this paper we focus in on a particular form of informal volunteering that occurs in the realm of community action / social participation (as depicted in purple text in Figure 1 above). Our discussion is especially concerned with volunteering activities undertaken by participants in 'community-led initiatives', which is an umbrella term to describe diverse self-organising projects, groups and participatory spaces that engage in collective problem solving.[34] These grassroot efforts are led and driven by local communities aimed at filling governance and market voids. They provide spaces of action where people can come together to solve a collective issue; for example, they set up a project, start a group or create physical or virtual space such as a community garden, a café or a Facebook page. Some community-led initiatives are platforms of outreach, where people driving the initiative seek to engage forgotten, hidden or marginalised publics by providing a vital service (for example, washing, justice, food or care), or by offering opportunities for support and connection. Some community-led initiatives provide alternative arenas within a given policy domain by offering novel, even disruptive, framings and solutions to public problems.

The field of contemporary volunteering has paid limited conceptual and empirical attention to community-led initiatives that engage in collective problem solving.[35] The informal, bottom-up, and relational way that community-led initiatives work tends to render their volunteering activities invisible to both the volunteer sector and government, even in recent discussions on informal volunteering. Indeed, the concept of 'informal volunteering' (as variously defined above) is too capacious to capture the collective problem-solving work undertaken in community-led initiatives. Definitions of informal volunteers mostly focus on their relational support and mutual assistance activities rather than on their collective problem-solving activities. However, in 'community-led initiatives' volunteering is less about providing mutual support, and more about solving a particular collective problem in a local community, for example, via a grassroots project, a civic enterprise, a neighbour trust or an informal civil society group.

Volunteers in community-led initiatives typically offer flexible and diverse ways for people to participate and contribute, ranging from steering and leading a group through to delivering services to those in need. This contrasts with more formal or professionalised

34 These grassroot efforts are variously labelled community-based initiatives, civic enterprises, self-help groups, or grassroots social innovations. See Hendriks & Dzur, 2021.

35 This has not always been the case. The emphasis of the volunteering sector has shifted away from grassroots initiatives to formal volunteer organisations, reflecting the evolution of many volunteer groups and bodies.

volunteering organisations, such as many charities, where volunteers typically have a volunteer agreement in place, fulfil workforce screening requirements, and undertake training. Empirical studies from diverse fields find that volunteers in community-led initiatives, such as self-help and mutual aid groups, cooperatives and civic enterprises, have the following common features[36]:

- they work in practical ways on concrete activities. Volunteers are often drawn in to provide professional skills or expertise.
- they engage in ephemeral ways, adapting their engagement around their individual skills and availability in a practical program of work. While some volunteers in citizen-led initiatives have a life-long commitments to solving a collective problem, most participants engage when they can and how they can.
- they work congruously/interdependently with public, private, non-private and government organisations. Typically volunteers in community-led initiatives are not antagonistic towards the state or market, though their activities can disrupt dominant problem frames and conventional policy solutions.
- they work as part of a collective group; they draw on a collective frame of reference (rather an individuated one). In other words, participants in community-led initiatives are not "plug-in" volunteers.[37] In many cases volunteers are actively involved in the running and decision making of the group/organisation.

The above list might suggest that community-led initiatives operate as spaces of social activism. Yet in contrast to the more antagonistic activities of activists and social movements, volunteers in community-led initiatives spend most of their time working on highly practical and experimental tasks to address a collective problem. Typically, they are motivated by a desire to work on practical solutions rather than by a commitment to a central utopian vision as found in social movements.[38] Indeed community-led initiatives are reflective of broader changes in how citizens are participating in contemporary democracies.[39] Today, participation in social and political issues is increasingly hybrid, challenging conventional notions that 'volunteering' is largely apolitical, while 'civic action' involves coordinated forms of political participation aimed at social change.[40] In practice volunteers in community-led initiatives might not describe their work as 'political', and yet they engage in practical interventions that have considerable disruptive effect on how a particular policy problem is framed and solved.[41]

36 see Edelenbos et al., 2020; Hendriks & Dzur, 2021; Igalla et al., 2019.
37 Eliasoph, 2011; Hustinx, 2010.
38 Hendriks & Dzur, 2021.
39 Theocharis & Van Deth, 2016.
40 for a discussion, see Evers and von Essen, 2019; Woolvin & Hardhill, 2013.
41 Dzur & Hendriks, 2018.

The volunteer sector in Australia currently lacks an appropriate nomenclature to make sense of, and understand, what community-led initiatives mean for local volunteer organisations and government. Current definitions and data collection on informal volunteering do not fully capture the distinct collective problem-solving work undertaken in community-led initiatives, where citizens are exercising considerable agency and pushing along novel governance solutions.[42] Incorporating community-led initiatives into discussions and policies of volunteering in Australia pushes us to reflect more broadly on the interface between citizen participation and volunteering, and the challenges and opportunities this brings for governments, civil society and volunteers.[43]

Policy implications

Understanding the societal and governance implications of diverse modes of informal volunteering is more important than ever.[44] In the first instance policy makers in government and in the volunteer sector need to recognise that informality in volunteering can be a desired end in itself, rather than an initial stage on the path to becoming formal. Policy makers must tread cautiously to avoid squashing the informality that lies at the heart of what attracts people to informal volunteering. They must also acknowledge that some informal volunteers, for example those engaged in a disruptive community-led initiative, may strategically use their informality to ensure distance from the state or to avoid their initiative being manufactured or replicated in formal state processes. Care should be taken to ensure that policies and support mechanisms do not hinder the agency and innovation of informal volunteers, especially in community-led initiatives.

Some forms of informal volunteering – such as the community-led initiatives discussed in this paper – pose mixed opportunities and challenges for governments, service providers and formal volunteering organisations. On the one hand, community-led initiatives can allow people to engage, build connections, develop alternative solutions to enduring public policy issues, and lift local capacity and resilience. Yet on the other hand, community-led initiatives can disrupt conventional policy practices, and challenge established power, roles and knowledge. Others raise concerns that self-mobilised initiatives might pose risks to community safety, or worry that informality can undermine efforts to coordinate state and non-state activities, for example in disaster contexts.[45]

The informal and sporadic nature of grassroots community projects can also mean that they bypass established mechanisms of state funding, accountability and regulation.

42 Hendriks & Dzur, 2021.
43 see Petriwsky, 2007.
44 Biddle & Gray, 2021.
45 see CoA, 2020.

Therein lies a labyrinth of potential safety and liability issues, some of which have been exposed during COVID-19 lockdowns where neighbourhood initiatives self-organised to support vulnerable residents, but their actions paradoxically may pose health and safety risks to those in need. Other risks include community-led initiatives that are exclusive, abusive or pushing agendas that undermine rights and freedoms.

What could be understood as forms of community-led initiatives and informal volunteering have long been part of the global South.[46,47] This is not just because there have been limited funds for government services, but because informality has long been an effective way to bypass often colonial and cumbersome formalised regulations, and to ensure support is relevant for localised contexts. Formal development organisations have long appreciated this dynamic and have developed a myriad of reflective and critical processes to support initiatives whilst being cognisant of power dynamics and oppressive economic and political forces.[48]

Recent research in the UK through the *Mobilising Volunteers Effectively* research project on mutual aid groups recommends the following advice for governments and community organisations[49]:

1. Respect the autonomy of informal groups as a fundamental aspect of their strength. Policies should appreciate the strengths of this informality, which is a valuable complementary resource and not a mere appendage to existing services.

2. Understand what support is needed and how it can be facilitated/enabled. Policies should play an enabling role for community-led initiatives as well as providing practical support, for example, with funding, grant applications, accounting, legal advice and office space.

3. Engage and listen meaningfully with communities rather than via 'tick the box' consultation.

4. Get the right balance. Do not limit the creativity and spirit of informality, but at the same time carefully think through regulatory issues.

46 see Mitlin, 2008.

47 The terms global North and South depict an imprecise distinction between populations that have directly been impacted by global development, dispossession, colonisation and slavery, as well as Indigenous, postcolonial and subaltern populations in whom have been targeted for such processes (see, Reuveny and Thompson, 2007; Müller, 2020). Whilst the literature rightly points to the global North and South terminology as imprecise and often problematic, we use this terminology purposely because the global South terminology is also used to signify an epistemological approach; "part and parcel of the postcolonial project of making the subaltern speak" (Müller, 2020: 735).

48 see Chambers, 1995; Freire, 1970; Lenette, 2022.

49 see Thiery et al., 2022.

Informal volunteering requires a paradigm shift in public policy thinking towards volunteers. Mutuality, flexibility and informality are at the heart these kinds of volunteering activities, and they cannot be harnessed into a homogeneous, one-size fits all approach to support or regulation.[50] Policy support then, as argued by Thiery et al, should be focused on "localised capacity building and build upon the flexibility and informality that encapsulates this type of volunteering…. [Policy] could support this by ensuring that volunteering policy and funding facilitates, embeds and enables these diverse, informal and flexible forms of engagement rather than restricting volunteering into a homogenous framework" (p.5).

Retaining volunteers is a huge challenge across all forms of volunteering – formal and informal. More policy consideration needs to be given to how to best provide feedback and recognition to individuals and groups engaging in the problem-solving work of community-led initiatives. The informal and sporadic nature of these community-led groups and projects can make it especially challenging to identify and contact volunteers, and then finding appropriate ways to celebrate and recognise their civic work.

Gaps

The volunteering ecosystem (which includes volunteering involving organisations, volunteering peak bodies and governments) lack suitable definitions, data and guidelines on self-organising approaches to voluntary activity. Empirical research is needed to inform policies, guidelines, and resources that promote responsive, effective, and inclusive community problem-solving.

We need a better understanding of how and when community-led initiatives interface and/or partner with government and formal civil society organisations, and what opportunities and challenges these interactions present to policy planning, accountability and service design. The power relations between community-led initiatives and formal policy processes need to be explored, as well as the degree to which government and civil society organisations are willing to share power and resources.

Future research must examine how some initiatives may strategically use their informality to ensure distance from the state or to avoid initiatives being manufactured or replicated in formal state processes. A better understanding of the different ways that governments and civil society organisations can hinder and/or enhance community-led initiatives is needed and this will help identify how community-led initiatives might be better connected to state or formal organisation-led programs.

50 Thiery et al., 2022.

Specifically, research is needed:

1. to generate empirical evidence to inform how formal civil society organisations and governments can enable responsive, effective, and inclusive community-led problem solving;

2. to strengthen the volunteer sector's capacity to i) appropriately represent and advocate for the diversity of informal volunteers, and recognise their contributions, and to ii) advise government on the changing nature of volunteering practices; and

3. to identify strategies to avoid or mitigate the potential disruptive impact of community-led initiatives on the services provided by government or formal volunteering organisations.

4. to co-design empirically-informed guidelines for volunteer organisations and government agencies on engaging and supporting community-led initiatives.

The new National Strategy for Volunteering should flag that further work is needed to understand how best to support informal volunteering in community-led initiatives. This needs to start with a better understanding of the views and experiences of those engaged in community-led initiatives and of the distinctive value that informal volunteering in community-led initiatives brings. Future research and policy development should focus on understanding the interfaces between informal volunteering in community-led initiatives, formal civil society organisations and governments.

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