

Ageing and working capability: volunteer work as a means to an active longevity

Invecchiamento e capacità lavorativa: il volontariato come mezzo per una longevità attiva

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In an ageing society, active longevity is a challenge of pivotal importance and a key-issue to sustainability. Through work, the human being feels empowered and useful, thus dignified, no matter the age. Volunteer work is no exception. Albeit not generating an income, volunteer work is a means to self-expression, personal development and social service. This paper, drawing from the experience of an Italian non-profit organization, where a group of senior citizens (+70) volunteer on behalf of “more senior” citizens (+80), explores the inherent potential of volunteer work as a means to furthering the working capability of the elderly, while generating social value.

Key words: Volunteer work, Ageing, Capability, Interest, Sustainability

In una società che invecchia, la possibilità di una longevità attiva costituisce una sfida di fondamentale importanza, nonché una questione cruciale in termini di sostenibilità. Attraverso il lavoro, l'essere umano sente di poter fare e di potersi rendere utile, quindi si sente dignitoso, a prescindere dall'età. Il lavoro volontario non fa eccezione. Benché non generi reddito alcuno, il lavoro volontario assicura infatti la possibilità di esprimere se stessi, promuovere il proprio sviluppo personale e rendere, al contempo, un servizio di valore sociale. Questo articolo, attingendo dall'esperienza maturata in una onlus italiana, dove un gruppo di anziani (più di 70 anni) presta attività di volontariato a beneficio di un gruppo di anziani ancora più avanti negli anni (più di 80), esplora il potenziale intrinseco del lavoro volontario quale modo di promuovere la capacità lavorativa degli anziani, al contempo generando valore sociale.

Parole chiave: Volontariato, Invecchiamento, Capacità, Interesse, Sostenibilità

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Introduction

One of the targets of the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development¹ consists of ensuring health and well-being to all, at all ages. It is ambitious a goal, though, considering the ongoing process of ageing of the world population, especially in certain regions such as Europe and North America, where the demographic transition is more advanced than in others².

The ageing of the population is one of the most relevant social transformations that the 21st century is currently featuring and a huge challenge that many countries are facing. It impacts society at large, by expanding its effects onto productive activities, family structure and intergenerational dialogue. It impacts the welfare system as well, especially in terms of overall expenditure, while raising questions of both social and financial sustainability. May it suffice considering the pension system, which absorbs much a larger share of financial resources than before. Therefore, it risks becoming, as time goes by, an unsustainable burden for the working segment of the population, which is bound to shrinking, at least in more developed countries, owing to low natality rates, which adds to the complexity of the issue at stake.

Quite obviously, the demographic shift is an issue of pivotal importance and one that politics cannot ignore, if social cohesion is not to be disrupted. It is then crucial to walk the path of change and focus on resilience, both at individual and community level, with a view to resisting and adapting to the ongoing social transformation. The aim is enshrined in the United Nations Agenda final pledge, that nobody is left behind, which is crucial a key to more a sustainable world. Therefore, it seems necessary to invest, both theoretically and practically, in improving the quality of life of an increasing number of both old and very old people, while pursuing strategies that ensure their integration within societies. Otherwise, the process of ageing, for an increasing number of people, will amount to being left behind, i.e. marginalized and excluded from the society mainstream.

Methodology

Undeniably, societies need coming to terms with the ongoing ageing process and politics should effectively address the growing demand for integration that it entails. Nonetheless, it is for the individual as well to come to terms with the

fast changing societal needs and show resilience in his own way. Every person is supposed to contribute, within her capabilities, to the sustainability of the world we live in and the elderly are no exception. Unless seriously impaired, they can contribute their own share to the common good³ by making use of the productive potential they are the depository of, which is not necessarily impoverished by the process of ageing.

Our assumption is that engaging in volunteer work is one of the option that the elderly have to make use of their potential and a way of embracing an active longevity, much to their own benefit and the benefit of the communities they belong in. By volunteering for institutions and non-profit organizations, the elderly may find meaningful ways to self-expression and pursue a number of different purposes, whether related to social needs, altruistic calls or search for acknowledgment. In turn, by recruiting the elderly to work as volunteers, many organizations and institutions worldwide can capitalize on the human capital that the elderly supply at zero cost. The question, then, is how to encourage the elderly to volunteer to their own benefit and that of society at large.

We have found that interest is the key. Interest is actually the thread that makes the capability of the elderly unfold into functioning, thus enabling a continuum of experience that ensures an active and meaningful longevity. This paper aims at reflecting on the notion of interest as a leverage that can be fruitfully triggered in order to involve the elderly in volunteer work.

Drawing from Amartya Sen's notion of capability and John Dewey's notion of interest, we aim at showing how actualizing the working capability of the elderly into a functioning that ensures active longevity is realistic an option. In particular, we report the successful experience of six volunteers at Associazione Alberto Sordi, a non-profit organization based in Rome, whose mission is the care of fragile senior citizens. The said experiences show how one's interest can be ageless and particularly apt to fuel the will to undertake volunteer work at a stage of life when work is no longer a contractual obligation. In so doing, we also highlight how the elderly who volunteer, while filling their day-time with meaningful activities, contribute to the mission of the organization they work for in no less valuable a way than remunerated workers.

Namely, in section three, starting from the notion of capability, we highlight the importance of an active longevity and discuss the relevance of volunteer work as a means to

¹ A/RES/70/1. Goal no. 3 consists of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being "for all at all ages".

² According to the UN findings, the number of people aged 80 or over is projected to increase more than threefold between 2017 and 2050, rising from 137 million to 425 million. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017), *World Population Ageing 2017 – Highlights* (ST/ESA/SER.A/397).

³ We assume, as a background notion of the common good, the definition taken from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 7th, 1965, that interestingly meets the overall contents of this paper. The common good is, in fact, described in terms of "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment".

that end. In section four, we refer to the concept of interest, as theorized by John Dewey, and consider its inherent relevance as a trigger to embark in volunteer work. In section five, after briefly introducing Associazione Alberto Sordi, we report the experience of six volunteers working with it, which highlights, in practice, the relevance of the concept of interest as a leverage for the elderly to volunteer. In section six, we draw our conclusion on the relevance of recruiting the elderly to perform volunteer work as a key to an active longevity that benefits both the individual and the society as a whole.

Working capability and longevity

From an individual perspective, a longer life expectation requires a projection into a future of growing vulnerability that could last for decades. Albeit not necessarily suffering from major medical conditions, the elderly become nonetheless vulnerable. As specified in the preamble of the Constitution⁴ of the World Health Organization, “health is a complete state of physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity”. Therefore, the poor health of the elderly is not necessarily or not only due to physical decline. It is also the consequence of both solitude and social exclusion, that often occurs when ageing, partly due to the natural course of events, which entails the inevitable loss of friends and relatives in the same age group, and partly due to the discriminatory attitude that tends to ostracize the elderly (Pennacchini, 2015).

In a world of cultural ageism, where autonomy and efficiency do often provide the yardstick by which to measure the inherent value of the human being, the elderly are at risk of becoming “the new aliens” (Russo, 2010), by ending up marginalized. The issue, though, is not so much in terms of age, rather in terms of being or not being capable of integration as valuable components of the society at large. Of course, life circumstances, while ageing, do change and rarely for the better. Physical decline, no matter how relevant, is undeniable. The risk of meaninglessness is as well inevitable, when there is no longer a workplace – including one’s home where to take care of the children – where to find a sense of purpose and to express one’s potential. Solitude is as well an inevitable threat at a time when friends and neighbours from the same age group pass away one by one. The social environment of the elderly is bound to impoverishment, while the opportunities of replenishing it drastically decrease.

It is nonetheless crucial, for the individual, to come to terms with the inevitable sense of deprivation that ageing entails, in order to avoid sinking in the loophole of social exclusion. Ageing is a fact of life one needs not to surrender to, as if it were defeat. Rather, it is a fact that is crucial to adapt to.

The elderly have to choose what kind of life they want to live and plan it. By making plans, the elderly are able to endow their present with a sense of purpose and project themselves into a meaningful future, thus preserving their inherent dignity and specificity. As Valera interestingly points out, planning is the one feature that marks the line between the human being and other living species (Valera, 2014), no matter the age. Planning is about nurturing one’s sense of the future, which, in the case of the elderly, is mainly about being open and making themselves “available” to whatever life has still to offer. Getting old does not necessarily rule out curiosity, nor it erases the opportunity to make yet another experience (Ammanniti, 2017). In a nutshell, the process of ageing does not impoverish the freedom of the mind, that is to say thinking, desiring and, of course, making plans (Dewey, 2014).

Thus, the old age is yet another chapter in one’s biography, that needs being lived through by investing in what is left, as time goes by: one’s capabilities, which provide a yardstick against which to measure the wellbeing of the human being. Sen’s idea of capability, that is to say “the opportunity to achieve valuable combinations of human functioning – what a person is able to do or to be” (Sen, 2005) allows to consider “whether a person is actually able to do things she would value doing”, and “whether she possesses the means or instruments or permissions to pursue what she would like to do” (Sen, 2005), given that the actual ability to do that pursuing may depend on many contingent a factor. Capability is what allows the individual to live a kind of life instead of another, that is to say “combinations of functioning” (Sen, 2005), therefore to make a choice between an array of possibilities (Sen, 2010). If we apply the concept of working capability to the elderly, we realize that their working capability is what allows them to choose a course of active longevity by engaging in some kind of work, rather than surrendering to a fate of decline, passivity and social exclusion.

Of course, health and strength normally deteriorate beyond a certain age (Brouwer et al., 2005), which can make it more difficult to work at the same pace as before. Nonetheless, it is still possible, for the elderly, to invest in some working activities, albeit at a different pace, as long as they are both able and enabled to do so. Framed in terms of capability, ageing is not to be understood as if it were all about loss, emptiness and lack of meaning. Resilience, which can be defined “as the ability to bounce back and recover physical and psychological health in the face of adversity” (Van Kessel, 2013), is the key. If “adversity” is to be understood in terms of the decline that ageing inevitably entails, bouncing back is not all about exercising. It is also about investing in one’s working capability, thus preserving the benefits that professional work⁵ entails. Work induces the perception of

⁴ The Constitution of the World Health Organization was adopted in 1946 and entered into force in 1948.

⁵ In our opinion, it is professional work whatever work absorbs most of the intellectual and physical energy, inasmuch as the time of the individual, no matter the remuneration or lack thereof. For

oneself not as a burden, rather as an asset. This is crucial to preserving one's self-esteem and nurturing a perception of self-efficacy.

Preserving an active role in the society by working, albeit at a different pace than before, is often an option and certainly helps coping with the transformation that the process of ageing inevitably entails. In order to adapt to the change, thus showing resilience, then the elderly should make the best of their working capabilities and find creative ways to work. The elderly are an asset whose lengthy life-cycle makes sense for both the individual and the society at large. They are the depositories of a productive potential, being knowledgeable, experienced and skilled by definition, for the mere fact that they have lingered longer, both in workplaces and social contexts. Therefore, they have working capabilities they can still make use of, whenever they are given a chance to do so. To that end, volunteer work can be the enabling answer.

There is a market for volunteer work and access, as in any other market, depends on qualifications (Wilson and Musick, 1997). The elderly, qualify for many a reason. Owing to the knowledge and skills acquired through numerous life experiences, they qualify for many volunteer a job. Besides, not having or having very little chance to get a remunerated job, their cost opportunity is very low. Moreover, they can contribute one valuable resource that other age groups are scarce of, that is to say plenty of time to devote to one mission. No longer pressed by remunerated work deadlines and family demands, time is the one resource they are endowed with. Volunteer work has been labelled as "leisure as work" and "work as leisure" (Wilson and Musick, 1997), as it encompasses both the inherent value of productive leisure and that of meaningful work. Considering that the time of the elderly is mainly, if not only, leisure time, volunteer work perfectly fits their schedule.

Many are the benefits that accrue to the elderly who undertake volunteer work. Volunteering offers the opportunity to express and practice both the knowledge and skills of the individual and to fill one's day-time with meaningful activities. Volunteer work indeed provides many of the benefits of remunerated work, such as a sense of purpose and self-efficacy, inasmuch as opportunities for social interaction. The relational aspect is crucial to one's wellbeing (Bertolaso and Rocchi, 2019), also as a way of overcoming disruptive life experiences such as loss and bereavment. Besides, many a study have proven that volunteer work has beneficial effect on the individual health (Howick, 2018). In a nutshell, volunteer work can compensate for both the lack of goals connected to remunerated work and the decline of demanding family roles, which are inevitably linked to the process of ageing. Therefore, volunteer work can function as a substitute, at least when institutionalized, as it provides the volunteer with

tasks, goals, schedules, resources, supervisors, as well as the opportunity of acknowledgment and social connectedness.

Nevertheless, the assumption that, in theory, volunteer work suits both the elderly and the society as a whole, as well as the acknowledgment that the elderly are capable of engaging in many volunteer a work, does not account for the reason why, in practice, the elderly would choose to volunteer. By definition, volunteering stems from free choice and not from any legal or moral obligation whatsoever. Drawing from Sen's reflection, if being capable focuses on whether a person is able to do things she would value doing, the capability of volunteering depends on whether the elderly who are able to volunteer, also deem volunteering valuable. Therefore, it seems important to try to understand which leverage can be triggered to encourage the elderly consider volunteering worth the effort of the inherent undertaking. Besides, as previously mentioned, Sen also specifies that being capable also depends on whether one possesses "the means or instruments or permissions" to pursue what she would like to do (Sen 2005). Regarding the elderly working capability, we can assume that such contingent, enabling factors can be understood in terms of specific job offers, therefore concrete opportunities of recruitment.

In an ageing world, the elderly are a huge and growing pool of potential volunteers that can actively contribute to the common good. Not making use of their working capability would both deny them a chance to engage in an active longevity, thus fostering their wellbeing, and entail the waste of a huge human capital. On the contrary, recruiting the elderly for volunteer work is a win-win option, where both the volunteer and the final recipients of their work, groups, institutions and so forth, have something to gain. The question, then, is how to recruit such work-force and make the best out of the productive potential it enshrines.

Volunteering out of interest

In the common understanding, the term volunteer implies "free choice, socially beneficial behavior, and the absence of market-rate financial compensation" (Rehnborg, 2015). The freedom of choice in volunteering is pivotal a trait that marks the line between volunteer work and the care provided to close relatives, or friends which, on the contrary, stems from a moral obligation. Volunteer work is actually "unpaid work provided to parties to whom the worker owes no contractual, familial or friendship obligations" (Wilson and Musick, 1997). Since volunteer work entails zero monetary wage⁶, economists have investigated the reasons why people engage in volunteer work. For instance, they have found that

instance, we consider the work that the housewife performs in the home as her main task professional inasmuch as any other work.

⁶ Working for free seems at variance with the so-called self-interest rationality, which is the fundamental paradigm of traditional economic theory.

the investment on professional development, with a view to a future employment, inasmuch as altruistic motives, can often explain why people do volunteer⁷. On the other hand, psychologists have mainly focused on the relational motive and found that the desire of expanding one's social circle can be decisive in the choice of undertaking volunteer work⁸.

Probably, the question entails no one-size-fits-all answer. Rather, every volunteer has his own specific motives, much depending on his social, cultural and economic background, as well as his contingent circumstances. Volunteers simply pursue their own purposes. Nonetheless, as far as the elderly are concerned, it is easy to infer that professional development is unlikely a motive to undertake volunteer work, being it very much connected to the aim of finding a job, or a better job, at a later stage in life. On the contrary, the relational motive can prove very relevant, given the penury of opportunities to expand one's social circle as the decades go by. Altruistic motives, both for religious and non-religious people alike, whatever the age, can as well prove an important driver. Another motive can be the aspiration to self-expression, which is very much connected to one's abilities and the desire of making use of them. In a nutshell, the motives that can induce a person to volunteer are numerous and varied, nonetheless they share in a common trait: they all make the effort worth the while. Therefore, whatever the specific motive to undertake volunteer work, it is invariably a motive that ensures that volunteering provides a rewarding experience.

Nevertheless, in order to understand what leverage is susceptible of being triggered to the end of recruiting as many elderly as possible into the cohorts of volunteer workers (Hochberg, 2015), a broad enough notion to account for all of the possible *ad hoc* motives that explain why people engage in volunteer work, is to be found. In our opinion, interest is broad enough a concept to encompass the complex dynamics of human behavior, thus accounting for all the possible motives underlying individual choices.

The notion of interest actually entails gratification *per se* because it invariably elicits personal growth. Therefore, it seems particularly apt to understand the non-monetary reward, whatever its specificity, that justifies the undertaking of volunteer work. As John Dewey points out in his pedagogic reflection, "the genuine principle of interest is the principle of the recognized identity of the fact to be learned or the action proposed within the growing self; that it lies in the direction of the agent's own growth, and is, therefore, imperiously demanded, if the agent is to be himself" (Dewey, 1923, p. 16). According to Dewey, "the root idea of the term seems

to be that of being engaged, engrossed, or entirely taken up with some activity because of its recognized worth" (Dewey, 1923, p. 17).

Thus, interest exists whenever a person undertakes an activity that she acknowledges as meaningful, being it "primarily a form of self-expressive activity" (Dewey, 1923, p. 21). In Dewey's understanding, though, the conditions of experience often fail "to create the interests and the capacities which will occupy later year fruitfully and happily". It is therefore crucial to understand "the kind of activities in which the older part of the population can engage with satisfaction to themselves and value to the community" (Dewey, 1942).

Interest, that can be only narrowly framed in terms of preferences (Grewal et al., 2006), is crucial to making choices. Specific interests, of course, may change over time, developing along with the transformations that occur at different stages in life, both within the self and the context where one's choices are made. Some of them are age and context dependant, others are ageless and not so much influenced by the environment. Surely, the way one's interests survive or transform into something different mirrors the adjustment that the human being is capable of. Above all, interest is what binds up the person to the external world, projecting his or her attitudes and aspirations towards ends that are the targets of experience. Experience does actually unfold in some kind of activity that bridges the gap between one's inner dimension (attitudes, desires and so forth) and its external projection (broad goals, specific ends etc.). The person's capability, therefore what one is able to do or to be, provided she has the contingent conditions that allow for being or doing, gains concreteness by unfolding into some kind of activity which is directed towards an end. Thus, interest is not simply an attitude or an internal state, nor is it simply a goal, rather being the situation that encompasses both.

As far as the elderly are concerned, interest is the key to step up their working capability to an activity, thus transforming their potential into a deliverable. Interest is what allows the elderly to plan, or re-plan their existence by choosing to make use of their time and abilities, thus furthering their experience and enhancing their level of participation within their communities. Hence, the notion of interest is the key to embracing an active longevity and the *trait d'union* between one's capability (being able of volunteer work, whether considered valuable) and functioning (engaging in volunteer work). Basically, for Dewey, interest is a developing disposition, connected with an activity and oriented toward an end that pile up into a continuum of experience. Therefore, in the perspective of the elderly, interest plays a crucial role as a potential trigger to engage in volunteer work, as it makes it meaningful, albeit gratuitous. Framed in terms of interest, volunteer work makes sense as "the result of a rational decision-making process" (Prouteau and Wolff, 2008). This is true for the elderly inasmuch as any other age group.

⁷ It has been argued that it is not necessary to assume that a significant proportion of the population is altruistic in order to explain the scale of volunteering in developed countries. (Katz and Rosenberg, 2005).

⁸ It is beyond the scope of this paper to highlight the various explanations that economy and psychology, inasmuch as other branches such as sociology and anthropology, have offered.

Therefore, the elderly can be motivated to make use of their capabilities and volunteer, by fuelling their interest, whatever its specificity. For instance, the elderly might be interested in developing their social network, thus they may focus on volunteering as one activity that gives them the chance to meet new people. They might as well be interested in meeting their altruistic call, therefore volunteer work provides a context where to feel useful. Learning new skills or making use of their abilities substantiate yet another kind of interest that volunteer work can satisfy. In a nutshell, volunteer work can make the elderly meet their ends, whatever they might be, by informing their choice, thus bridging the gap between their inner disposition and their specific goals.

Hence, fuelling the flame of interest in the elderly and giving them the chance to engage in activities that they are not only capable of, but also they are interested in, provides a key to their recruitment for volunteer jobs. Therefore, interest seems the one notion that nonprofit managers should rely upon, in order to encourage the elderly to volunteer in their organization. Overall, volunteer work has to be a win-win situation. The organization benefits from human capital at zero cost, while the elderly have the chance to engage in rewarding experiences, no matter the lack of monetary compensation. This is precisely what happens at Associazione Alberto Sordi, where the administrators have successfully recruited some elderly to devote their time and abilities to the service of yet another group of elderly. The experiences of six volunteers, working at Associazione Alberto Sordi, are therefore reported in the following section as concrete examples, in John Dewey's previously quoted words, of "activities in which the older part of the population can engage with satisfaction to themselves and value to the community" (Dewey, 1942).

Volunteer work of the elderly on behalf of the elderly

Associazione Alberto Sordi is a non-profit organization based in Italy, that provides day-care to numerous elderly⁹ whom are selected amongst those that are no longer fully autonomous. The latter's personal circumstances often feature solitude, which contributes to their condition of vulnerability. Professionals from different domains contribute their work to the mission of the organization, whose goal is that of safeguarding the dignity of the elderly by helping them maintain or revamp their self-esteem and sense of purpose in life. This is done in many a way, including providing them

with opportunities to engage in different workshops where to find a new interest or revamp an old one.

The organization not only employs professionals to pursue its mission, though. It also recruits elderly volunteers and largely benefits from the contribution of time, energy and knowledge that they offer. The said elderly mainly work as trainers and organize theme-related workshops, where they perform those activities they are both interested in and knowledgeable about. Owing to their contribution, the elderly who are in day-care are offered the opportunity of both socializing and learning by doing, while being entertained. Thus, they get involved in activities where they are invariably required to focus, understand, memorize, evaluate, make decisions and eventually undertake a task until accomplishment. Moreover, learning does not happen isolation, rather as a group, which allows to share in the achievements, while enhancing connectedness and sense of belonging.

The focus is on lifelong learning, which is understood as a viable key to slowing down the decline of the cognitive functions. Drawing from Dewey's approach to education, the assumption is that education is not to be interpreted as a means to an end. Rather, education is an end in itself, meaning that the aim of education is no more (and no less) than a better education. Therefore, learning is as useful and meaningful a process for the elderly as for any other age group (Pennacchini, 2015). By means of education, the human being, whatever the age, walks the path of personal growth and builds on previous personal experiences. Each experience draws from the knowledge acquired at an earlier stage in life and projects the knowledge that it enshrines into the next step.

The continuity of experience is self-evident, when looking at the work done by the elderly who volunteer at Associazione Alberto Sordi. As further illustrated, they volunteer out of interest for both the specific activity they engage in and the personal benefits that accrue to them as a result of their work. Basically, they make use of the know-how acquired by either pursuing their hobbies or their previous professional career. Fundamentally, volunteer work allows for their know-how to step up into a value-laden deliverable that, while providing other people with a chance of learning, also furthers their own experiences in a continuum that gets richer every additional step of the way.

While performing those activities they are interested in, the elderly who volunteer at Associazione Alberto Sordi contribute to the accomplishment of the mission of the organization in as fundamental a way as remunerated professionals. Only – and much to the benefit of the organization – they provide human capital at zero costs. As previously mentioned, volunteering is not about monetary reward. The volunteers find satisfaction and take pride in what they do, as the following stories, clearly depicting a win-win situation, show.

⁹ Associazione Alberto Sordi is a non-profit organization based in Rome, which was founded in 2002 and backed by the Alberto Sordi Foundation. It provides day-care to groups of elderly who are particularly vulnerable and actively contributes to foster research in the field of ageing. It also provides professional training to prospective caregivers.

The experience of L.

L. was born in 1935 and started volunteering at Fondazione Alberto Sordi in 2005. She immediately got involved in music workshops, by offering to play the accordion and to start a choir. Music has always been her great passion and the accordion the first musical instrument she has mastered, albeit not the last. She also learnt to play the piano as well as the flute, the latter at an advanced stage in life. Before retiring, L. used to work as a typist but music, in her own statement, has been the thread of her entire life, albeit never stepping up to a proper profession. Therefore, volunteering at Associazione Alberto Sordi gives her the chance to make use of her musical skills, while nurturing to the fullest her genuine and everlasting passion for music.

L. enjoys volunteering and feels blessed to have the opportunity to express her musical passion and potential. The elderly who are in day-care at Fondazione Alberto Sordi benefit from L.'s involvement and their expression of gratitude adds to her satisfaction. Learning to sing in a choir encourages the elderly to cooperate and endows them with a sense of belonging. It also helps them focus, memorize and stay on task, while exercising both their vocal and breathing systems. Quite obviously, this is a win-win situation. A long-lasting passion for music, coupled with L.'s ability to play the accordion, is the interest that has motivated L. to undertake volunteer work at Associazione Alberto Sordi. The latter, by enabling her to perform the volunteer work she has offered to undertake, benefits from her work which certainly contributes, at no cost, to the accomplishment of its mission.

The experience of C.

C. was born in 1937 and used to be a yoga teacher. In her own words, "yoga is a path within the self", which she had the chance to discover decades ago, when suffering from certain medical conditions that yoga, recommended as a therapy, helped healing. Since then, she invested in yoga and trained until she qualified as a yoga teacher. In 2009, C. started volunteering at Associazione Alberto Sordi. Regularly once a week, she has been offering yoga classes to the elderly in day-care. By volunteering, C. has maintained both her working skills and professional identity intact. In a nutshell, at Associazione Alberto Sordi, C. keeps doing what she has always done, thus ageing has not entailed work-related sense of impoverishment.

The elderly at Associazione Alberto Sordi look forward to her classes. While training, they are very attentive and try their very best, which makes C. feel acknowledged. Her classes are very useful, as they enhance the elderly perception of their own body and help defusing their tensions, while giving them the chance to improve the quality of their breathing. Moreover, yoga increases their capability of staying focused on specific movements. At the same time, C.'s volunteer work contributes to the mission of Associazione Alberto Sordi, at

zero costs. The win-win situation, stemming from C.'s interest for yoga as a path within the self, is *in re ipsa*.

The experience of E.

E. was born in 1944 and started volunteering at Fondazione Alberto Sordi in 2015. Once a week, he proposes music-related activities, based on attentive listening to both classic and pop music and related talks. He often makes use of videos. Before retiring, he used to work as an assembling technician for the national TV and was involved in the editing of TV programmes. Listening to music has always been his great passion and one that he keeps nurturing by volunteering at Associazione Alberto Sordi.

E. takes a pride in what he does. Above all, he feels useful for the very possibility of being able to spark an interest for music in other people. In his own statement, "it is a wonderful sensation to see the contentness of the elderly", as a result of his music listening sessions. Clearly, his interest for music goes hand in hand with his altruistic motive. Thanks to E.'s volunteer work, the elderly at Associazione Alberto Sordi get entertained, acquire knowledge, stay focused and defuse their tensions. The win-win balance is *in re ipsa*. E's volunteer work, based on both his musical and philanthropic interest, is a way for him to make use of his knowledge to the benefit of other people, while effectively contributing to the active longevity mission that Associazione Alberto Sordi has embraced.

The experience of G.

G. was born in 1946. He qualified as a lawyer and worked for both a bank and a multinational gas and oil company. After retiring, he volunteered in a couple of non-profit organizations before starting his volunteer work at Associazione Alberto Sordi. Every week, he reviews the press to the benefit of the elderly who are in day-care. He has always taken an interest in reading. Besides, being his mother a famous journalist, newspapers have been part of his daily routine since childhood. In his own statement, being in charge of the press review workshop at Associazione Alberto Sordi feels like going back to his parents' home, where his mother used to read up to 10 newspapers a day and so did he.

When asked about his motive for undertaking volunteerism, G. says there is nothing rational about it. It is like an inner voice calling, that cannot be further explained. In G., though, the relational motive lingers behind the surface, as he stresses that volunteering has given him the opportunity of meeting new people and developing meaningful relationships with both the caretakers and the caregivers.

In G.'s experience, his lifelong interest for the press and his ability of insightful reading permeates the volunteer work that he performs, much to his satisfaction and that of the elderly that benefit from his contribution. The elderly actually acquire new knowledge, get emotionally involved, find new topics for reflection and conversation, while having the op-

portunity to exchange ideas and to engage in critical thinking. By pursuing his interest, G. involves other people in a very valuable activity that certainly fits in the active longevity vision of Associazione Alberto Sordi, whose furtherance he effectively contributes to.

The experience of R.

R. was born in 1948. Since 2013, she has been volunteering at Fondazione Alberto Sordi. She is in charge of a knitwear and tailoring workshop that produces garments either to be sold on the occasion of charity events, or to be worn when drama-related activities are performed. R. learnt both knitting and embroidery as a child and transformed her skills into a business at a later stage in life. Before, she worked as a tourist guide and a secretary in a foreign company for quite a while.

She got to know Associazione Alberto Sordi when recovering from loneliness and depression. Her therapist suggested the day-care as a way to get to in touch with a different environment and mingle with new people. Therefore, she has started off as one of the fragile and vulnerable elderly Associazione Alberto Sordi takes care of. After being in the day-care, R. decided to volunteer and offered to be in charge of the tailoring and knitwear workshop. In her own statement, volunteering makes her feel important, which is what she mostly lacked and longed for in her life. Basically, her interest for tailoring and knitting, combined with her professional experience, are both revamped and furthered by means of volunteer work. Her reward for what she does is the sense of empowerment that she gets in turn.

The elderly at Associazione Alberto Sordi benefit from R.'s work. By tailoring and knitting, they find creative ways to self-expression, improve fine motor skills, invest both in patience and determination and strengthen their self-esteem by means of their achievements. The organization obviously benefit from R.'s valuable and non remunerated contribution to the furtherance of its mission.

The experience of I.

I. was born in 1949. Since 2012, she volunteers at Associazione Alberto Sordi twice a week. I. is in charge of the arts and crafts workshop. She supplies the material by recycling whatever can be creatively recycled. The handicrafts made at the arts and crafts workshop are showcased on occasion of exhibitions, or used during drama workshop and other activities.

I. has always been interested in arts and crafts and enjoys teaching. Before retiring, she used to work as a professional teacher of both domestic economy and applied technologies. Therefore, by volunteering at Associazione Alberto Sordi, she keeps preserving her professional identity as a teacher. Besides, she keeps nurturing her passion for arts and crafts. According to her statement, she also enjoys the cooperation amongst the elderly, that is pivotal to the realization of the

crafts. The elderly, in turn, enjoy the activities that I. is in charge of, as they allow for self-expression, unleash creativity and improve fine motor skills. Again, this is a situation where both I. and the recipients of her volunteer work have much to gain, while Associazione Alberto Sordi benefits from the human capital that I. provides at zero cost.

Conclusions

In a world that is ageing at a fast pace, the elderly productive potential should not be ignored. In particular, by undertaking volunteer work, they can have a great impact, as they can supply a number of organizations and institutions with an invaluable resource: human capital at zero cost. In turn, by engaging in volunteer work, the elderly have the opportunity of walking the path of an active longevity, which not only is beneficial to themselves, but also builds social value and furthers the advancement of the common good.

By volunteering, the elderly make use of their abilities, enhance their well-being and contribute their time and energy to valuable causes, which fills their day-time with meaning and sense of purpose. Feeling productive, thus useful, adds to their self-esteem, positively impacts their overall health and makes them feel in control over the course of events, thus counteracting the sense of loss that the process of ageing inevitably entails.

From the perspective of the society as a whole, enabling the elderly to experience a higher quality of life by making use of their working capability means overcoming the perception of the growing cohorts of old people as a burden that weighs on a shrinking workforce. In fact, the elderly that undertake volunteer work join in that workforce and share in the same dignity.

Societies should strive to involve the elderly in volunteer work, thus giving both the elderly and themselves a chance to significant benefits. Eliciting an interest in the elderly should be the key, since nobody engages in an activity, unless a mandatory one, if interest is not acting as a driving force.

Governments have a crucial role to play in this respect. It is for them to allow for the working capability of the elderly to find effective ways to actualization. To name just one useful intervention, they may sustain the volunteer labor market, thus creating the circumstances, for organizations and institutions of many a kind, to find it convenient to recruit the elderly.

Only by making sense of the productive potential of the elderly can we generate inclusive societies where both their self-enhancement and the social value that they are capable of producing are connected to the aim of more sustainable a world for all. Recruiting the elderly into the fold of volunteer work is therefore both a challenge and a means to make sure that no-one is left behind, as the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development pledges.

Further studies, focused on the notion of interest, are nonetheless needed in order to ensure that the success story of a few elderly, volunteering on behalf of other elderly, becomes only one amongst many of a kind, in the years to come.

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