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Not peer-reviewed version

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[Keisuke Kokubun](#) *

Posted Date: 16 March 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202603.1188.v1

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Article

Beyond Altruism: Analytical Volunteers and the Formation of Social Innovation Networks

Keisuke Kokubun

Graduate School of Management and Kyoto University; kokubun.keisuke.6x@kyoto-u.jp

Abstract

This study examines the role of volunteers in the formation of social initiatives that utilize local resources. Previous research on volunteering has typically explained participation in terms of altruistic motives and a desire to contribute to society. However, this study focuses on intellectual curiosity—specifically, an interest in observing on-site situations and analyzing problem structures, as a factor that supports the continuity of volunteer activities. The study analyzes a local resource project that utilizes camellia leaves naturally growing on a remote island in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. Using qualitative analysis, we examine the activities of a central practitioner, referred to as Practitioner A. Practitioner A plays a bridging role by connecting multiple actors, including local residents, companies, welfare facilities, tourism stakeholders, and researchers. This study conceptualizes such practitioners as “**analytical volunteers**.” Analytical volunteers are participants who are motivated not only by altruistic intentions but also by an intrinsic interest in observing real-world situations and constructing activities through problem analysis. The case analysis reveals that while the camellia project has succeeded in forming a network among diverse actors, it has not yet achieved stable commercialization. This stage is interpreted as the “growing pains” of social innovation in local communities. This study contributes to volunteer research by highlighting the presence of participants motivated by analytical thinking and by demonstrating the importance of network intermediaries in the formation of regional innovation processes.

Keywords: analytical volunteers; volunteer motivation; social innovation; network formation; social entrepreneurship; local communities

1. Introduction

Volunteer activities are commonly explained in terms of value-oriented motivations such as altruism and a desire to contribute to society. Large-scale sociological studies have also emphasized that volunteering is embedded in broader social structures such as life course, social networks, and civic institutions (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Moreover, cross-national studies suggest that volunteer motivations are often multifaceted and may include learning opportunities, career development, and social interaction in addition to altruistic values (Handy et al., 2010). Much of the existing research has focused on analyzing why individuals participate in unpaid social activities. In social psychology and sociology, volunteer participation has typically been understood as behavior arising from empathy toward others, endorsement of public values, or a sense of social responsibility. This perspective has been valuable in demonstrating the important role of volunteering in society and in clarifying the values and psychological motivations that lead individuals to engage in social activities.

However, observations of real-world social initiatives suggest that even among individuals who share similar values, some continue their involvement while others participate only temporarily. Many people recognize the importance of contributing to society and hold positive attitudes toward volunteer activities. Nevertheless, only a limited number of individuals sustain long-term engagement. This suggests that explanations based solely on values and motivations may be insufficient for understanding the persistence of volunteer activities.

In recent years, volunteer research has increasingly emphasized the need to understand volunteering not merely as the outcome of individual motivations but as a form of **social practice**. From this perspective, participation in social activities is not unidirectionally determined by fixed motivations or values; rather, it emerges through dynamic processes shaped by experiences and relationships formed in the course of practical engagement. Volunteer activities can therefore be understood not simply as altruistic behavior but as a form of social practice embedded in real-world contexts.

In particular, observations of practical initiatives in local communities reveal that individuals who continue to sustain such activities are not always motivated solely by the desire to help others. Rather, they often demonstrate a strong interest in observing local situations, identifying problems, and exploring possible solutions. For these individuals, social activities function not only as acts of service but also as arenas for understanding local contexts and reconstructing relationships among actors.

Against this background, the present study examines the case of practitioner A, who is involved in a community-based resource utilization project. A first became engaged in community activities through post-disaster support efforts following the Great East Japan Earthquake and has since continued to participate in various social initiatives. Currently, A is involved in a regional project that utilizes camellia leaves naturally growing on a remote island in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. This initiative operates within a network involving multiple actors, including local residents, companies, welfare facilities, tourism stakeholders, and researchers.

A's activities do not fit neatly into the conventional framework of volunteer participation. By connecting local residents, companies, welfare organizations, and administrative actors, A functions less as a typical volunteer participant and more as an intermediary linking diverse stakeholders. Furthermore, the project spans multiple domains—including local resource utilization, social welfare, tourism, and research—making its structure highly multi-layered.

Another notable aspect of this initiative is that, while it has succeeded in forming a regional network, it has not yet developed into a stable revenue-generating enterprise. In other words, the activity has expanded with the support of many actors, but it has not yet been institutionalized as a sustainable economic venture. Such a situation is frequently observed during the emergence of new initiatives in local communities. In this study, this stage is conceptualized as the **“growing pains” of social innovation**.

This study pursues two main objectives. First, by analyzing A's activities, it seeks to identify the qualities that sustain long-term volunteer engagement. In particular, the study highlights the possibility that the continuation of volunteer activities is supported not only by altruistic motivations but also by practical knowledge derived from observing and analyzing on-site situations. Second, the study aims to clarify the challenges that arise in the transition from network formation to business development in community-based initiatives.

Through these analyses, this study seeks to offer a new perspective to both volunteer studies and research on community-based practice. Specifically, it conceptualizes practitioners who sustain activities through an interest in observing and analyzing real-world situations as **“analytical volunteers.”** By introducing this concept, the study attempts to expand the understanding of volunteer activities beyond conventional explanations based solely on altruistic motivation.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Research on Motivations for Volunteer Participation

Research on volunteer activities has a long history, and much of this literature has focused on understanding why individuals participate in unpaid social activities. In particular, studies in social psychology often explain volunteering as behavior based on value-oriented motivations such as altruism, empathy, and a sense of social responsibility. These studies have made important

contributions by demonstrating the significant public role of volunteer activities in society and by clarifying the psychological factors that lead individuals to engage in social initiatives.

One of the most influential theoretical frameworks for explaining volunteer participation is the **functional approach** proposed by Clary and colleagues. According to this theory, individuals participate in volunteer activities in order to satisfy various psychological functions. These functions include the value function, understanding function, social function, career function, protective function, and enhancement function. The value function reflects altruistic values such as the desire to help others, while the understanding function corresponds to the desire to gain new knowledge and experiences. The social function relates to strengthening relationships with others, whereas the career function reflects motivations related to gaining professional experience.

The functional approach has been widely used as a framework for explaining the diverse motivations underlying volunteer participation. In fact, many studies have shown that volunteering is not driven by a single motive but rather by a combination of multiple psychological factors. Moreover, research has demonstrated that volunteer activities are not merely acts of service but also play an important role in individuals' self-realization and the formation of social relationships.

Recent studies have also suggested that sustained volunteering cannot be explained solely by initial motives, but must be understood in relation to retention, long-term commitment and changing trajectories of participation (Hogg, 2016; Faletan et al., 2021; Arka, 2023). Recent research has also highlighted that volunteer loyalty and long-term commitment are influenced by contextual factors such as organizational relationships and perceived recognition (Lorente-Ayala et al., 2025).

However, much of this literature has focused primarily on the question of **why individuals begin participating in volunteer activities**, while paying comparatively less attention to the question of **why some individuals sustain their involvement over the long term**. Although many people recognize the importance of contributing to society, only a limited number continue volunteering for extended periods. This suggests that understanding the persistence of volunteer activities requires attention not only to motivations but also to the practical processes through which activities are enacted and sustained.

2.2. Volunteering as Social Practice

Recent developments in sociology have proposed a perspective that understands human behavior not merely as the outcome of fixed motivations but as something formed within social practices. This perspective, often referred to as practice theory, suggests that human action is not determined solely by individuals' internal values but is shaped through everyday activities and interactions.

From the perspective of practice theory, volunteer activities cannot be simply explained as the result of altruistic values. Rather, individuals gradually develop roles and patterns of action through their experiences in the field and through interactions with others. In this sense, volunteering should be understood not as the expression of fixed motivations but as a process of social practice.

From a practice-theoretical perspective, volunteering is not simply an expression of prior values but an accomplishment emerging through situated action, embodied routines and ongoing interaction (Schatzki, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002).

This perspective is particularly important for understanding activities within local communities. In community-based initiatives, individual roles are rarely predetermined; instead, they often emerge gradually through participation in activities. For example, individuals who initially join as ordinary participants may later assume roles as coordinators or organizers. Such role transformations are likely to arise from the accumulation of practical knowledge developed through participation in activities.

Therefore, understanding volunteer activities requires attention not only to individual motivations but also to the forms of practice that occur within the field of activity. In particular, forms of practical knowledge developed through on-site experiences—such as the ability to identify problems and coordinate among actors—may play a crucial role in sustaining long-term engagement.

2.3. Social Capital and Community-Based Activities

Another important concept for understanding activities in local communities is social capital. Social capital refers to the social resources embedded in relationships among individuals, including trust, networks, and cooperative relationships. Research on social capital has suggested that the vitality of local communities and the sustainability of social activities are supported by the accumulation of such relational resources.

Many community-based initiatives cannot be sustained solely through the efforts of individual actors. Rather, they depend on the trust and collaborative relationships that develop among participants. For instance, activities such as organizing community events or utilizing local resources often require cooperation among multiple stakeholders. These cooperative relationships are not formed instantly but are gradually accumulated through repeated interactions and sustained engagement.

Social capital also plays a significant role in the formation of local enterprises. New community-based initiatives do not necessarily generate clear economic benefits from the outset. In many cases, trust and cooperative relationships among participants are established first, and only later do these relationships evolve into economic activities. In this process, individuals who coordinate activities and connect different actors often play a crucial role.

In this sense, some volunteers may act not only as participants but also as brokers who connect otherwise separate actors and translate across organizational domains (Dean, 2014; Obstfeld, 2005; Burt, 2004). In some contexts, volunteers who assume such bridging roles may also contribute to community resilience and informal leadership within local initiatives (Lough, 2021). At the same time, previous studies remind us that volunteering may also involve tensions and unintended consequences within community organizations (Talbot, 2015).

Such intermediaries do not merely participate in activities; they actively facilitate relationships among diverse stakeholders and create new forms of collaboration. Individuals who perform these bridging functions are therefore considered key actors in the formation of community-based initiatives.

Recent studies have also emphasized that volunteering increasingly operates across institutional boundaries, linking community initiatives with broader policy agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (Ellis Paine et al., 2020).

2.4. Positioning of the Present Study

Based on the above discussion, it becomes clear that understanding volunteer activities requires attention not only to motivational factors but also to the processes of practice and the formation of social capital. Building on these perspectives, the present study analyzes the case of practitioner A, who is involved in a community-based resource utilization project.

In particular, this study focuses on the possibility that the factors sustaining volunteer activities may lie not only in altruistic motivations but also in practical knowledge derived from observing on-site situations and identifying problems. Through the analysis of A's activities, the study conceptualizes practitioners with these characteristics as "analytical volunteers."

The concept of the analytical volunteer is proposed not as a replacement for existing motivation-based theories, but as a complementary lens for understanding how sustained volunteering is organized through practical problem-solving and relational work in community settings.

By introducing this concept, the study seeks to clarify the intersection between volunteer research and studies of community-based practice, and to provide a new perspective on the roles played by practitioners who sustain social initiatives.

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative single-case study focusing on the activities of practitioner A, who is involved in a community-based resource utilization project. The rationale for adopting a

single-case study approach is that the purpose of this research is not to measure general motivations for volunteer participation, but rather to identify factors that sustain long-term engagement by closely examining the activity processes of a specific practitioner. The formation of social initiatives and the development of community networks are complex social processes that cannot be fully understood through quantitative methods alone. Therefore, this study adopts a qualitative approach that emphasizes the contextual understanding of a concrete case.

The subject of the study, referred to as A, became involved in community activities through support efforts following the Great East Japan Earthquake and has continued to participate in various social initiatives since then. Currently, A is involved in a regional project that utilizes camellia leaves naturally growing on a remote island in Miyagi Prefecture, Japan. This project involves multiple stakeholders, including local residents, companies, welfare facilities, tourism stakeholders, and researchers. The present study focuses on this camellia project as the primary context for analyzing the development of A's activities.

This case was selected as a revelatory and analytically valuable case because practitioner A's role extended beyond direct service provision and made visible the underexplored processes through which volunteering, brokerage, and community-based innovation intersect. The aim of the study is analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization.

The data used in the analysis consist of three main sources. First, the study examines activity records and business planning materials prepared by A and related stakeholders. These documents include records describing the objectives of the camellia project, its activities, the process of building relationships with the local community, and attempts at business development. Second, the analysis utilizes meeting records related to the project. These records include discussions about the progress of the activities, emerging challenges, the roles of different stakeholders, and future directions of the initiative. Third, the study draws on written materials that summarize the historical development of the project. These documents were used to reconstruct the formation process of the project along a chronological timeline.

The analytical procedure proceeded in several steps. First, the collected materials were organized chronologically in order to reconstruct the trajectory of A's activities. Subsequently, the analysis examined how problems were recognized within the activities and how relationships among stakeholders were formed. Particular attention was given to how A identified problems in the field and built relationships aimed at addressing those issues.

In addition, the study examined the process of network formation in the development of the community-based initiative. Specifically, the analysis identified the types and roles of actors involved in the camellia project and examined how these actors were connected to one another. Through this analysis, the study sought to clarify that A's activities extend beyond conventional volunteer participation and instead involve an intermediary role linking multiple stakeholders.

In qualitative case study research, researchers' interpretations may influence analytical outcomes. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, this study cross-referenced multiple sources of data throughout the analytical process in order to confirm the validity of interpretations. Furthermore, efforts were made to interpret statements and actions recorded in the materials within their broader contextual settings so as to accurately capture the realities of the activities.

From an ethical standpoint, this study ensured the protection of individual privacy by anonymizing the identities of persons involved in the analysis. In addition, all documents related to the activities were used strictly within the scope of the research purpose, with careful consideration given to avoiding harm to the interests of individuals or organizations involved.

Through these methods, the study analyzes the development of A's activities and the formation of a community network, with the aim of identifying the characteristics of the practical knowledge that supports sustained volunteer engagement.

4. Case Study: The Formation Process of the Camellia Project

This section describes the formation process of the camellia project, which constitutes the empirical case examined in this study. The activities of practitioner A did not originate from a single predefined plan. Rather, they gradually emerged through the accumulation of experiences in various social initiatives and through interactions with existing practices. Therefore, this section traces the development of the activities chronologically in order to clarify how the current project came into being.

The starting point of A's social activities was support work following the Great East Japan Earthquake. After the disaster, numerous volunteer initiatives were launched across affected regions to assist in reconstruction, and A participated in these relief activities as one of the volunteers. This experience became a turning point that led A to become involved in issues facing local communities. In the course of disaster recovery efforts, many individuals cooperated in rebuilding their communities. Through this experience, A came to recognize that social activities are not merely acts of service but are formed through relationships among people.

Following these disaster support experiences, A became involved in a variety of activities within the local community. One of these initiatives focused on social programs for elderly residents. As population aging progressed in the region, creating opportunities for older adults to remain socially connected became an important challenge. A became involved in organizing spaces where elderly residents could gather and interact, and also participated in the management of lectures and activities aimed at senior participants. Through these activities, A began to reflect more deeply on the nature of relationships within local communities.

The regional project utilizing camellia resources emerged as an extension of these earlier activities. However, the project did not originate from A independently identifying camellia resources as an opportunity. Rather, the initial impetus came from the initiatives of Company B, which produces and sells products made from camellias. Company B had already commercialized products utilizing camellias naturally growing in the Sanriku region and had also begun collaborating with welfare facilities in parts of the production process. After learning about these initiatives, A began to consider whether a similar approach could be implemented as a regional activity in the Miyagi area.

A particularly important moment occurred when A heard from the representative of Company B that collaboration might also be possible in the Miyagi region within the broader context of camellia resources in Sanriku. This conversation prompted A to consider the possibility of extending similar initiatives to the Miyagi area. In other words, the camellia project was not conceived entirely from scratch by A; rather, it developed through an attempt to explore how existing initiatives by Company B could serve as a starting point for new activities in the Miyagi region.

Subsequently, A began to explore the possibility of involving local elderly residents in the harvesting and processing of camellia leaves. To this end, A started investigating locations within Miyagi Prefecture where naturally growing camellia trees could be harvested. Several candidate locations were considered. Among them, A recalled a remote island that A had visited previously and where the natural environment was closely intertwined with everyday community life. Through personal connections, A was introduced to local residents of the island and began visiting repeatedly in order to explain the intentions behind the initiative. Through ongoing dialogue with island residents, A explored the potential for activities that combine the utilization of local resources with environmental management. As part of efforts to establish collaborative relationships with the community, A also applied for a municipal community collaboration program. Although the proposal was not selected, this process demonstrates that A's activities were developed within a framework of cooperation with the local community.

One notable characteristic of the camellia project is that the utilization of camellia resources does not revolve around a single business plan but instead unfolds through multiple streams of activity. Existing camellia-based products have already been commercialized by Company B, and A has been involved in supporting their promotion and dissemination. At the same time, possibilities for

developing new products utilizing camellia leaves and buds are being explored through trial-and-error collaboration with Researcher C. In addition, research on the potential uses of the fragrance of camellia leaves is being conducted in collaboration with researchers.

Furthermore, there are discussions about involving welfare facilities in parts of the harvesting and processing of camellia leaves. If realized, such initiatives could link the utilization of local resources with opportunities for welfare-oriented employment. In addition, stakeholders have discussed the possibility of developing experiential activities and tourism initiatives that make use of the natural environments in which camellia trees grow.

In this way, the camellia project has developed as a cross-sectoral initiative spanning multiple domains, including local resource utilization, welfare, tourism, and research. However, the initiative has not yet been established as a stable business. Systems for harvesting camellia leaves, processing materials, and distributing products remain at an experimental stage, and a sustainable structure for continuous production and sales has not yet been fully established.

Such a situation is frequently observed during the early stages of new initiatives in local communities. Activities may expand through relationships among people, but it often takes time before they develop into stable economic enterprises. In this study, this stage is conceptualized as the “growing pains” of regional enterprise formation.

The camellia project is currently in precisely this transitional phase. Within this process, A’s role extends beyond that of a typical volunteer participant. Rather, A functions as an intermediary who connects diverse actors while expanding the possibilities of the initiative. This role has not received sufficient attention in conventional volunteer research and therefore constitutes a key focus of analysis in the present study.

5. The Concept of Analytical Volunteers

An important feature that emerges from the case analysis is that A’s activities cannot be explained solely by goodwill or altruistic motivation. In A’s own accounts, a recurring theme is the enjoyment derived from observing situations and thinking about how things can function more effectively. A does not describe these activities as moral obligations; rather, they are framed as a process of problem solving. This characteristic suggests a dimension that differs from the motivational models typically assumed in conventional volunteer research.

In the literature on volunteering, altruistic values and a commitment to social contribution have been emphasized as primary motivations for participation. For example, the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) proposed by Clary et al. (1998) organizes volunteer motivations into six functions: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement. Similarly, Wilson (2000) and Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) interpret volunteer activities from the perspectives of social solidarity and civic participation. These studies provide important frameworks for understanding the psychological motivations and social factors that support volunteer activities.

However, the case examined in this study suggests the existence of an additional element that may help explain the persistence of volunteer engagement. This element lies in the participants’ interest in observing on-site situations, understanding the structure of problems, and exploring ways to improve them. In A’s narrative, expressions such as “*thinking about how things can run efficiently*” and “*considering what matters most*” repeatedly appear. Such expressions indicate a mode of thinking that frames volunteer activities as arenas for problem solving.

This study conceptualizes this characteristic as “analytical volunteers” (Figure 1). Analytical volunteers are participants who derive satisfaction from analytical processes such as observing situations, understanding problem structures, and reorganizing roles within social activities. Rather than being satisfied simply with helping others, these individuals are interested in improving how situations function in practice.

An important point is that analytical volunteers do not necessarily create entirely new activities from scratch. In many cases, they draw insights from existing practices or initiatives in other regions and adapt them creatively to their own local contexts. In the case examined in this study, A expanded

activities by referring to earlier examples of camellia resource utilization and adapting them to the specific conditions of the local community. This process of “reference and adaptation” represents a key characteristic of analytical volunteers.

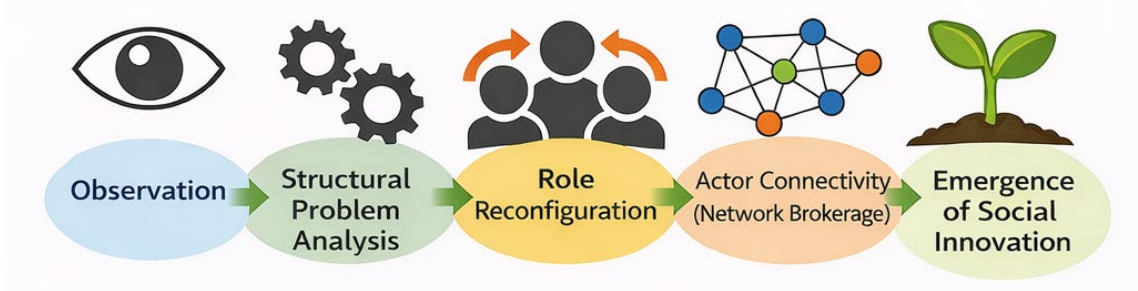


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Analytical Volunteer.

Clear characteristics of an **analytical volunteer** can be observed in A’s activities. For example, when observing work processes at a welfare facility for people with disabilities, A paid attention not only to the tasks being performed but also to the working style of the staff and the overall organizational atmosphere. A noted that the staff appeared to enjoy their work and that role division had developed naturally among them. Based on these observations, A reflected on why the organization was functioning effectively. Such observations demonstrate not merely the perspective of a participant but an analytical orientation aimed at understanding the structural dynamics of the activity.

A also emphasizes “**acting efficiently**” as a guiding principle of personal behavior. According to A, the experience of raising children taught the importance of managing tasks efficiently within limited time. This experience appears to influence A’s approach to social activities as well. In practice, A attempts to identify which tasks are most critical in a given situation and then considers how they can be carried out most effectively. This behavioral pattern suggests that A views volunteer activities not simply as acts of service but as **processes of problem solving**.

Another important aspect of analytical volunteers is their role in **network formation**. Within the camellia project, A connects a variety of actors, including companies, welfare facilities, tourism stakeholders, and researchers (Figure 2). Although A does not personally carry out all activities, A expands the possibilities of the initiative by combining the roles of different actors. This type of role is consistent with Granovetter’s (1973) theory of **weak ties** and Burt’s (1992) concept of **structural holes**. Individuals who bridge different social domains can play a crucial role in the emergence of new activities.

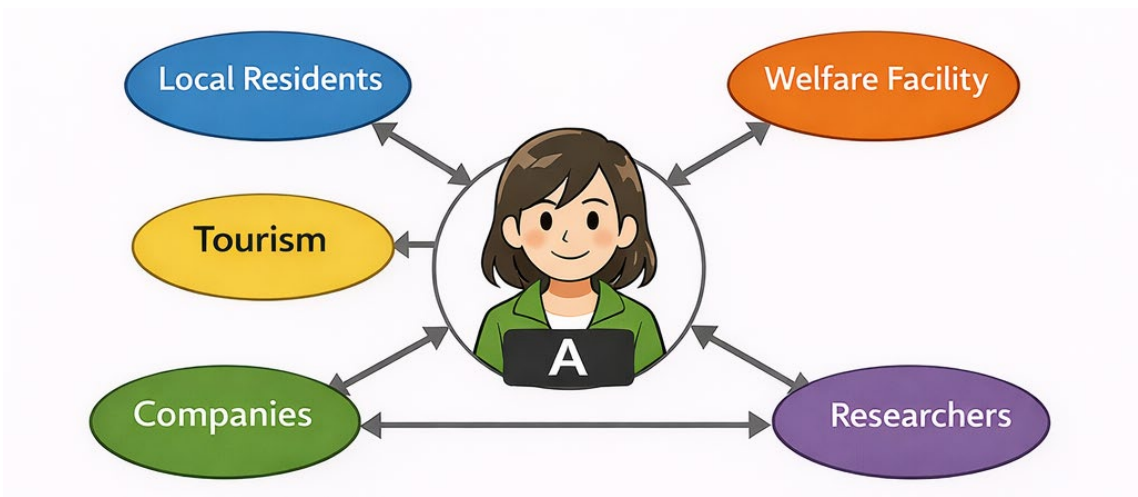


Figure 2. The Role of Practitioner A.

However, the activities of analytical volunteers do not necessarily lead immediately to economic outcomes. In many cases, particularly during the early stages of an initiative, a situation emerges in which networks expand while revenue generation remains limited. In the case examined in this study, although A has successfully established relationships with a wide range of actors, the camellia project has not yet developed into a stable business. This stage can be understood as a transitional phase in the process through which social initiatives evolve into sustainable enterprises.

From this perspective, analytical volunteers should not be viewed merely as participants in social activities. Rather, they may play an important role in generating the early stages of **social innovation**. The ability to understand the structural nature of problems in the field and to construct relationships aimed at addressing those problems can become an important resource in the formation of new initiatives within local communities. The case presented in this study therefore suggests that, in order to understand volunteer activities, it is necessary to consider not only altruistic motivation but also the role of **analytical thinking**.

6. Network Formation and the “Growing Pains” of the Camellia Project

The previous section introduced the concept of the analytical volunteer as a key theoretical contribution of this study. Building on this concept, the present section examines how A’s activities have contributed to the formation of a social network and why this network has not yet developed into a stable business.

An important point to note is that A did not create an entirely new business model from scratch. Rather, A’s activities were initially inspired by learning about earlier initiatives that utilized camellia resources. In particular, the activities of Company B served as an important reference point for A in linking camellia resources with community activities and welfare-related work processes. In this sense, A’s role in the present case is better understood not as that of an original inventor but as a practitioner who draws on existing initiatives and expands them within the context of the local community while connecting them to a wider range of actors.

At the same time, A’s role goes beyond simple imitation. Using earlier initiatives involving camellia resources as a starting point, A mobilized personal experience in community activities as well as existing social networks in order to build relationships with diverse actors, including local residents, companies, welfare facilities, tourism stakeholders, and researchers. In this sense, A can be understood as an intermediary who connects prior examples with local contexts and expands the possibilities of the initiative through network building.

One of the defining characteristics of the camellia project is that it has developed as a network-based initiative involving multiple stakeholders. The main actors identified in the case include:

- (1) community groups harvesting camellia leaves,
- (2) companies responsible for processing camellia leaves,
- (3) welfare facilities that may participate in parts of the processing process,
- (4) local tourism stakeholders,
- (5) government actors, and
- (6) university researchers.

A’s role has been to stand between these actors and function as an intermediary connecting their activities.

For instance, the utilization of camellia leaves involves separate actors responsible for harvesting and for processing. Although camellia leaves grow naturally in the region, converting them into commercial products requires specialized processing techniques. A therefore established contact with companies producing camellia-based products and explored possibilities for incorporating harvested leaves into the processing chain. Furthermore, if parts of the processing process could be undertaken by welfare facilities, this would create opportunities for welfare-oriented employment. In this way, the utilization of camellia leaves holds the potential to link local resources, corporate activities, and welfare initiatives.

In addition, the project has potential connections with tourism. The island where camellia trees grow possesses a rich natural environment and thus has value as a tourism resource. Local tourism stakeholders have suggested that harvesting and processing camellia leaves could potentially be incorporated into experiential tourism programs. If such programs were realized, they could create opportunities for visitors to participate directly in the utilization of local resources.

The project also has the potential to connect with academic research. If scientific research on the fragrance of camellia leaves and their psychological effects advances, such knowledge could enhance the value of camellia-based products. Indeed, research is already being considered on the potential relaxing effects associated with the fragrance of camellia leaves, and such findings may eventually contribute to product development and tourism programs.

Thus, the camellia project is gradually taking shape as a network-based initiative spanning multiple domains, including local resources, welfare, tourism, and research. However, this network has not yet developed into a stable economic activity. A himself recognizes the current situation as one in which “the elements are gradually connecting, but the project has not yet taken concrete form.”

This situation is consistent with what has often been described in the literature on social entrepreneurship and regional innovation as the *formation stage* of new initiatives. In the early stages of social innovation, networks often expand as many stakeholders express interest, while revenue structures and organizational systems remain underdeveloped (Mair & Marti, 2006; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). At this stage, the social significance of an initiative may be widely recognized, but economic sustainability is difficult to secure because a concrete business model has not yet been established.

A's activities appear to be situated precisely in this stage. Although A has successfully established relationships with many actors—including local residents, companies, welfare facilities, tourism stakeholders, and researchers—the conditions necessary for integrating these relationships into a coherent enterprise have not yet been fully realized. For example, the production system linking camellia leaf harvesting, processing, and sales remains in an experimental stage, and a stable supply structure has not yet been established. Similarly, sales channels and pricing structures have not yet been fully developed.

Another important factor is that many aspects of the current activities continue to rely on volunteer efforts. Much of A's own work is currently unpaid, and activities such as harvesting camellia leaves and maintaining the surrounding environment are largely performed by volunteers. While this situation demonstrates the strong social value of the initiative, it also raises challenges for long-term sustainability.

A describes this situation as “growing pains.” In other words, although the direction of the initiative is becoming clearer and many stakeholders are supportive, additional time is required before the activities can develop into a concrete business. At this stage, a gap exists between network formation and business model establishment.

However, it would be inappropriate to interpret this stage merely as stagnation. Rather, this phase plays an important role in the emergence of social innovation. As networks involving diverse actors take shape, the potential for new forms of activity gradually becomes more concrete.

More specifically, A acted not only as a contact broker but also as a translation broker, interpreting the interests and constraints of different actors and aligning them around feasible forms of collaboration.

The present case illustrates how volunteer activities can evolve into new forms of social enterprise through the formation of social networks. At the same time, it demonstrates that this process is not linear. Instead, a prolonged transitional period often exists between network formation and business development. This transitional phase can therefore be understood as a key characteristic of the process through which new social initiatives emerge.

In this study, “growing pains” refers to a transitional phase in which network formation and stakeholder interest advance more quickly than the consolidation of a viable business model, organizational routines, and revenue structure.

7. Discussion

This study examined the motivations and practical characteristics that sustain volunteer activities through a case of social initiatives utilizing local resources. Based on the preceding analysis, this section discusses the theoretical implications of the findings from three perspectives: the reinterpretation of volunteer motivations, the role of volunteers as network intermediaries, and the formation process of social innovation in local communities.

7.1. *Rinterpreting Volunteer Motivation*

Previous research on volunteering has primarily explained participation in terms of altruistic values and a desire to contribute to society (Clary et al., 1998; Wilson, 2000). This framework provides an important perspective for understanding the ethical dimension of volunteer activities. However, the case examined in this study suggests the existence of another dimension that may be crucial for understanding the persistence of volunteer engagement.

A's narrative indicates that volunteer activities are perceived as spaces for observing situations and considering how they can function more effectively. A demonstrates a strong interest in observing how roles are distributed among participants and how work processes unfold in practice. Moreover, A describes the act of thinking about how tasks can be carried out more efficiently as an enjoyable aspect of the activity itself.

Such characteristics cannot be fully explained by frameworks that interpret volunteering solely as altruistic behavior. In this study, this pattern of engagement is conceptualized as the analytical volunteer. Analytical volunteers are individuals who derive satisfaction from analytical processes in social activities, including observing situations, understanding problem structures, and reorganizing roles among participants. Rather than acting solely on the basis of goodwill, these individuals are intellectually engaged in the problem-solving processes embedded in social practice.

This perspective partially overlaps with the understanding function identified in the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary et al., 1998). However, the present case suggests that such analytical engagement may serve not merely as a supplementary motivation but as a central factor sustaining long-term participation. Volunteer activities may therefore function not only as arenas for social contribution but also as sites of practical learning, where individuals analyze and address real-world problems.

While the VFI's understanding function captures the desire to learn and gain experience through volunteering, the analytical volunteer refers more specifically to a mode of sustained engagement characterized by problem structuring, situational diagnosis, and the reconfiguration of relationships among actors in practice. In this sense, the concept does not merely describe learning-oriented participation, but a practically reflexive orientation toward improving how collective action is organized in context.

7.2. *The Role of Network Intermediaries*

A second important implication concerns the role of analytical volunteers as intermediaries within social networks. In the case examined in this study, A plays a central role in connecting multiple actors, including companies, welfare facilities, tourism stakeholders, government actors, and researchers.

Such a role corresponds to the bridging function discussed in social network research. According to Granovetter's (1973) theory of weak ties, connections between different social groups can play an important role in introducing new information and opportunities. Similarly, Burt's (1992) theory of structural holes highlights how actors positioned between otherwise disconnected networks can create new value by mediating flows of information and resources.

A's activities illustrate this type of network brokerage. Although A does not belong formally to any of the major institutional actors involved in the project, A establishes relationships with each of them and facilitates connections among them. Through this process, the idea of utilizing camellia

resources has expanded into an initiative that connects multiple domains, including local resources, welfare, tourism, and academic research.

This perspective differs from the traditional view of volunteer activities as simply acts of social service. Instead, analytical volunteers can be understood as intermediaries linking different social domains, thereby playing an important role in the formation of new initiatives.

7.3. *The Formation Process of Social Innovation*

The third implication concerns the formation process of social innovation in local communities. In the case examined here, the camellia project has attracted interest from many stakeholders but has not yet developed into a stable business. This situation corresponds to what research on social entrepreneurship often describes as the formation stage of new initiatives (Mair & Marti, 2006).

Social innovations frequently begin as volunteer-driven initiatives. As activities expand, networks gradually form, and the possibility of developing a business model begins to emerge. However, this process rarely proceeds in a linear manner. Instead, a prolonged transitional phase often exists between the expansion of networks and the establishment of a sustainable revenue structure. Such patterns are consistent with broader observations that voluntary action often operates as a mechanism for mobilizing community resources and coordinating informal collective action (Musick & Wilson, 2008). Studies of social innovation have similarly emphasized that many initiatives emerge through hybrid collaborations between civil society actors, communities, and organizations before formal institutionalization occurs (Nicholls & Murdock, 2012).

The present case provides important insights into this transitional phase. Although A has successfully connected many stakeholders, several conditions necessary for establishing a stable enterprise remain underdeveloped. This stage should therefore not be interpreted simply as stagnation. Rather, it represents a critical phase in the formation of new social initiatives.

During this phase, the role of individuals becomes particularly significant. Analytical volunteers such as A play a key role by observing local problems, connecting stakeholders, and exploring new possibilities for collaboration. Such actors may therefore represent an important driver in the emergence of social innovation within local communities.

This interpretation is consistent with social innovation research that treats early-stage initiatives as emergent configurations in which relationships and problem framings often mature before stable business models are established (Mulgan et al., 2007; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014).

8. Conclusion

This study examined the practical characteristics and social roles that sustain volunteer activities through a case of social initiatives utilizing local resources. By analyzing the activities of practitioner A, who is involved in a community-based project centered on the utilization of camellia resources, the study sought to identify new factors that support the persistence of volunteer engagement.

The first contribution of this study lies in presenting a new perspective on the motivations underlying volunteer activities. Previous research has largely explained volunteering in terms of altruistic values and a desire to contribute to society. However, the case examined in this study suggests that volunteer activities may also be perceived as arenas for observing situations, understanding the structure of problems, and exploring ways to improve existing systems. This study conceptualizes this characteristic as the analytical volunteer. Analytical volunteers are participants who are intellectually engaged in the process of problem solving within social activities and who tend to organize their activities through the analysis of real-world situations.

The second contribution of the study is the identification of the role of volunteers as network intermediaries. In the present case, A plays an important role in connecting multiple actors, including companies, welfare facilities, tourism stakeholders, government actors, and researchers. Although A does not carry out all activities personally, new opportunities for collaboration emerge through the connections established among these actors. This role is closely related to the bridging functions

discussed in social network research and suggests that volunteer activities may play an important role in the formation of social networks.

The third contribution concerns the formation process of social innovation in local communities. The case analyzed in this study shows that, although the camellia project has attracted interest from many stakeholders and the network surrounding the project has expanded, it has not yet developed into a stable business. This situation corresponds to what has been described in research on social entrepreneurship as the formation stage of new initiatives. The findings of this study suggest that such a stage should not be interpreted merely as stagnation but rather as part of the process through which new social initiatives emerge.

The case also highlights the importance of individual actors in the formation of social initiatives. Analytical volunteers such as A observe local situations, connect stakeholders, and expand the possibilities of social activities. Such practitioners can therefore be understood as actors who contribute to the early emergence of social innovation within local communities.

From a practical perspective, the findings also provide implications for supporting volunteer activities in local communities. Volunteer activities are often discussed in terms of goodwill or service. However, the present findings suggest that practical abilities—such as observing local situations and identifying ways to address problems—may play a crucial role in sustaining volunteer engagement. Accordingly, promoting volunteer activities may require not only encouraging participation but also providing opportunities for participants to analyze and address real-world challenges within their communities.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the research is based on a single case study, and further research is required to examine whether the concept of analytical volunteers can be applied to other contexts. Second, the study focuses primarily on the formation process of the activities, and it remains unclear how the camellia project will develop in the future.

Future research should therefore compare multiple cases of community-based initiatives in order to more systematically understand the roles of analytical volunteers and the processes of social network formation. In addition, longitudinal studies that trace how community-based resource projects evolve into sustainable enterprises would provide valuable insights.

Despite these limitations, the case examined in this study offers important insights for understanding volunteer activities. Volunteer engagement may not simply represent expressions of goodwill but may also be sustained by practical knowledge derived from observing and analyzing real-world situations. By highlighting this dimension, the present study provides a new perspective for understanding the relationship between volunteer activities and the emergence of social innovation.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to express sincere gratitude to Mika Ishikawa of the voluntary organization Enjoi! Nice Me!! for her generous cooperation in providing the case material for this study.

Ethical Considerations: This study was conducted with the informed consent of the participant, and all analyses were carried out in a manner that ensured anonymity and protected personal information. Although the author had a degree of involvement in the participant's activities, every effort was made to maintain analytical objectivity throughout the research process.

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