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## Hidden economy of unpaid work takes centre stage

Economic austerity, welfare reform and the Coalition Government's Big Society agenda is serving to highlight the true value of volunteers to the nation's economy, argues a Northumbria University, Newcastle academic.

On Wednesday 14 May, Professor of Public Policy, Irene Hardill, will deliver a public lecture focusing on how both formal and informal unpaid voluntary work make up a 'hidden economy' that supports and underpins paid work.

In her inaugural lecture, Creating 'space' for 'work': Exploring the connections

and contradictions between paid and unpaid work, Professor Hardill will share her research into the changing world of waged and voluntary work as well as examining the ways in which individuals juggle between the two.

She will argue that focusing on training for the labour market as the main benefit of volunteering risks excluding and discouraging those who can't work, and devalues the contributions of large numbers of citizens who are beyond the labour market because of age, disability or care commitments.

The topic is timely in light of the Government's new 'Help to Work' scheme coming into force this month. The controversial scheme aims to help long-term unemployed people to get into work via intensive coaching and compulsory community work for up to six months. Opponents of the scheme have called for charities and voluntary organisations not to take part in the programme.

Professor Hardill said: "Voluntary unpaid work makes up a 'hidden economy', which supports the 'visible' economy of paid work. The 'hidden economy' is composed of a myriad of unpaid activities, undertaken within the home, as well as within communities, either informally on a one-to-one basis or more formally through an organisation.

"Unpaid voluntary work doesn't just take place in the voluntary and community sector, it is also found in the public and private sectors. Think of the roles volunteers perform within the NHS. And the private sector through employee volunteering schemes supports other sectors of the economy, as well as providing volunteer experience through internship schemes.

"Voluntary and community organisations play such an important role in filling gaps in society. Our social challenges today are extremely complex – the result of economic forces. The number of people seeking help from food banks is increasing, as are pleas for help with managing debt and dealing with fuel poverty. Cuts to local authority budgets, along with budget cuts being experienced by voluntary and community sector organisations mean that the services and amenities we have taken for granted are in danger of disappearing, unless we can support them in different ways."

Professor Hardill's research has found that, on a personal level volunteering also develops an individual's self-confidence and provides a structure for their lives – getting them out of the house and interacting within the

community. While being driven by different motivations, volunteering provides the sense of meaning and identity that many people find in a satisfying job.

Professor Hardill has particular expertise in volunteering and the voluntary and community sector, demography and ageing, and knowledge exchange. Her research has also explored career prioritisation within couples, and the wider public benefits of social science. Her work has featured in a number of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) publications and she is the author of over 115 publications, including eight books. She is a member of ESRC Training and Skills Committee, former Membership Secretary of the Academy of the Social Sciences, and is former Vice Chair of the Regional Studies Association.

During her lecture, Professor Hardill will draw on her own experiences and discuss the tensions involved in building academic careers in order to explore wider issues about the meanings of and motives for 'work' in contemporary society.

"I've always been fascinated by the world of work," she said. "My family was in business. My great grandfather established an iron foundry in the West Riding in the nineteenth century. I remember being quite young and looking at the signs on factory buildings, the sign on the foundry, which read 'William Hardill & Sons' and wondering why his daughter wasn't acknowledged. That set me off thinking about gender roles and gender identities and the world of work and how society values paid or unpaid work."

'Creating "space" for "work": Exploring the connections and contradictions between paid and unpaid work' takes place at 6.30pm in Northumbria University's City Campus East on Wednesday 14 May. A pre-lecture drinks reception will begin at 6pm.

Anyone wishing to attend can email [nu.events@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:nu.events@northumbria.ac.uk).

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