



## SUMMARY

# International Exchange and Solidarity Volunteering as a Response to Environmental Challenges



Study  
June 2025

Supported  
by

  
**MINISTÈRE  
DE L'EUROPE  
ET DES AFFAIRES  
ÉTRANGÈRES**  
*Liberté  
Égalité  
Fraternité*

  
**MINISTÈRE  
DE LA TRANSITION  
ÉCOLOGIQUE,  
DE LA BIODIVERSITÉ,  
DE LA FORÊT, DE LA MER  
ET DE LA PÊCHE**  
*Liberté  
Égalité  
Fraternité*

# 1 Context and Challenges of the Study

In line with its role as a platform, France Volontaires has launched several collaborative studies with its members and partners in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), environmental challenges, and the ecological transition.

Also supported by the *Commissariat Général au Développement Durable* (CGDD) of the French Ministry for Ecological Transition, this study has several ambitions

1

To explore the many ways in which volunteering can respond to and contribute to environmental challenges through volunteering programmes and missions.

2

To expand knowledge production and refine the measurement of the contribution of volunteering to environmental challenges by developing specific and replicable tools.

3

To highlight the contribution of volunteers to the Sustainable Development Goals SDGs, by showcasing their role as key stakeholders in sustainable development, both in France and in partner countries.

This summary presents the key findings of the study carried out by France Volontaires on the contribution of international exchange and solidarity volunteering (V.I.E.S) to environmental challenges within the framework of the 2030 Agenda. In an era of planetary boundary overshoot, the study **underscores the role of volunteering as a concrete lever for the ecological transition**, through a variety of actions carried out on the field. It reveals that, beyond the missions explicitly labelled “environmental,”

volunteers are involved in practices relating to education for sustainable development, agroecology, climate resilience and citizen participation. This mobilisation is rooted in committed structures, multi-stakeholder partnerships and a strong personal commitment on the part of volunteers, including beyond their assigned mission, making V.I.E.S **a driving force for initiatives that address environmental challenges and renew international cooperation.**

## A Three-Phase Study:



Panorama



Measuring effects



Co-constructed recommendations with members and partners

## The resources of the study:



5 semi-structured interviews



23 France Volontaires members and partners engaged



2 questionnaires:  
one for volunteers (SCI, VSI and VEC)  
↳ 521 responses  
one for host organisations  
↳ 166 responses



1 case study in Senegal



4 focus groups



A document review  
(programme evaluation, mission reports...)

## 2 Panorama of the Contribution of V.I.E.S to Environmental Challenges

### 2.1 Volunteer Practices

The study identified a **great diversity of activities** in volunteers' missions, structured around a classification of **45 types of practices**.

Top 10 practices carried out as part of volunteering missions, across all areas of intervention, in relation to environmental challenges (reported via the host organisations questionnaire):



According to the volunteers, **40.9 % of missions involve raising awareness**, a fundamental step in bringing about change. However, to bring about global change, it appears necessary to **rely on the diversity of possible**

**actions by volunteers, from raising awareness of environmental challenges to more technical activities**, which can be done in a complementary way and as part of a commitment pathway on environmental challenges.

## 2.2 Various Ways of Integrating Environmental Challenges into Structures and Missions

The majority of host organisations claim to integrate environmental challenges into their practices, but in various ways:

Do organisations integrate environmental challenges in their strategic objectives?	Depending on host organisations
Yes, they integrate practices in a cross-cutting manner	53,6 %
Yes, it is their core mission	27,7 %
Yes, to adapt to local policies or regulations	24,7 %
Yes, the intention is there, but improvement is needed	24,7 %
Yes, occasionally to meet lessor expectations	10,2 %
Other	3,6 %
No, not at all	3 %

When organisations integrate environmental challenges into their strategies, it is most often **in a cross-cutting manner**, by combining them with other themes such as “youth and education for sustainable development”, “gender and climate”, “social inequalities and environmental health”. This approach can promote a **systemic understanding of the interdependencies** between social and environmental challenges.

For 47 % of host organisations, environmental challenges define the objectives of the volunteers’ mission. We also

note that organisations that proactively integrate these challenges into their strategies offer **more environmentally significant missions**.

Meanwhile, 19.7% of the volunteers surveyed via questionnaire stated that they did not carry out missions related to environmental issues, focusing exclusively on areas such as education, childhood, health, local development, and civil society strengthening. This result shows that over **80% of the volunteers surveyed contributed to environmental issues during their assignment**.

## 2.3 Trained Volunteers Committed Beyond Their Missions

Volunteers who responded to the questionnaire are mostly between 20 and 35 years old, with 80 % holding postgraduate degrees. Additionally, 42.8 % of volunteers were employed before their mission, while 26.7 % were students.

Regardless of the scheme, **volunteers are highly qualified to respond to complex challenges** and carry out projects relating to ecosystem management, the fight against climate change, environment-related public health and education for sustainability.

Outside the framework of their mission, **nearly three quarters of volunteers carry out personal actions** linked to environmental challenges:

In an individual capacity, outside the framework of your mission, have you contributed to any of the following environmental actions?	
Raising awareness of environmental challenges	50,1 %
Applying a circular economy: reduce, repair, recycle, reuse	35,7 %
Promoting cycling and public transportation	15,7 %
Developing urban vegetable gardens	12,9 %
Eliminating chemical products	10,2 %
Developing a carbon footprint	3,9 %
No action related to environmental challenges	26,3 %
Other	4,2 %

Several factors seem to encourage this parallel commitment:



**Education level:** 61.5 % of the volunteers involved in these actions have a degree equivalent to two years of higher education or more.



**Duration of mission:** 60 % of volunteers involved in personal actions have been in mission for more than six months.

Furthermore, the volunteers who expressed a desire to learn more about ecological challenges were also those who were most involved in complementary actions.

Thus, volunteers' commitment to the environment is not limited to their mission description: it is also expressed through personal initiatives, often closely linked to the field, the people they meet and the resources available. This confirms **the potential role of V.I.E.S as a catalyst for concrete initiatives**, even outside defined frameworks.

## 2.4 Interculturality and Reciprocity: Levers for Renewed Environmental Cooperation

The universal dimension of the 2030 Agenda takes on a particular resonance with the Planet Pillar of the SDGs, which call for systemic transformations both in the "North" and the "South."

The **logic of reciprocity**, of which V.I.E.S is a part, appears essential to international cooperation on environmental challenges, as illustrated by the sharing of expertise, exchanges of practices, the co-construction of local projects and the development of participatory science. V.I.E.S is therefore based on a balanced, **horizontal partnership approach**, similar to that used for decentralised cooperation projects involving volunteers.

In preparation for departure, modules on interculturality help volunteers to better understand intercultural differences, social codes and the traditions of host communities. International volunteering fosters better understanding and links between peoples, and in particular with citizens who share similar values, **thereby strengthening the feeling of belonging to a community committed to protecting the environment** at a global level. In this context, **intercultural dialogue** at the heart of V.I.E.S represents an important lever for environmental challenges.

# Effects of Volunteering on Environmental Challenges

## 3.1 A Concrete Lever for Achieving the Environmental SDGs

Data analysis from this study shows that **62 % of the practices implemented by volunteers contribute directly to environmental SDGs**, in particular **SDG 2** (sustainable agriculture), **SDG 4** (education for sustainable development), and **SDGs 13, 14 and 15** relating to climate, aquatic life and terrestrial biodiversity.

In addition, V.I.E.S fully embodies the spirit of **SDG 17**, which calls for revitalising the global partnership for sustainable development, by mobilising stakeholders from civil society, local authorities and public institutions, both in France and in partner countries.

### SDGs Radar

To assess and evaluate the contribution of V.I.E.S to the SDGs and identify areas for improvement, the “SDGs Radar” tool, developed by the association 4D, was adapted and used as part of this study.

#### It takes the form of:



An Excel table listing the SDGs and the V.I.E.S practices linked to the SDG targets  
(as identified in the overview)



A rating scale (quotation) from 0 to 3 for various mission activities, defined as:

0

no action  
(it is important to check for negative impacts)

1

isolated actions  
implemented occasionally

2

recurring  
and ongoing actions

3

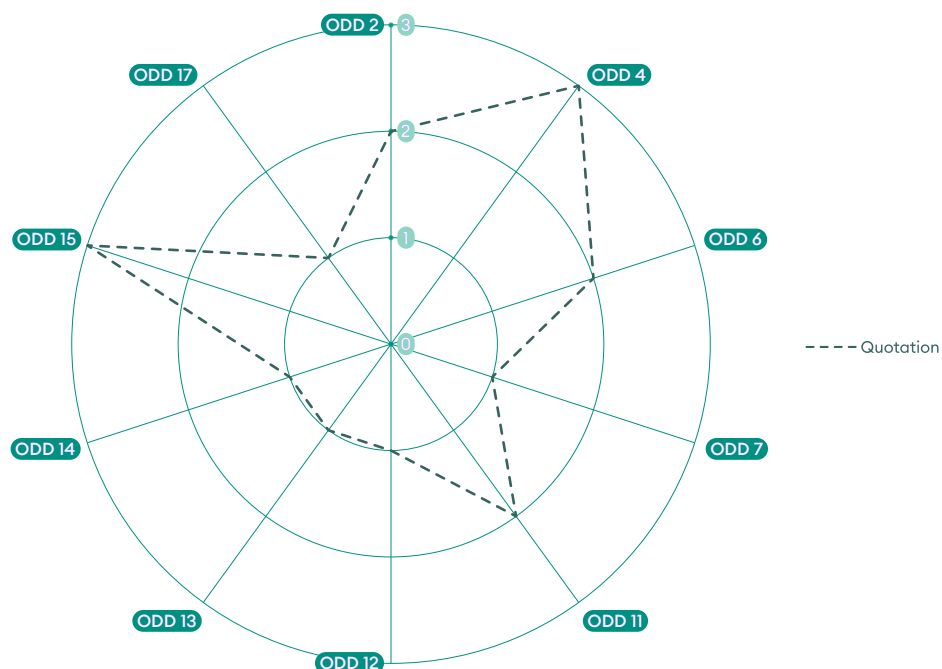
initiatives supported by  
partnerships and managed  
according to their impact



This rating assesses the relevance, coherence and effectiveness of the activities.



A clear graph making it easier to read the contributions to the SDGs, the evolution of the actions implemented in the V.I.E.S and measure their impact on sustainability.



In this study, the SDGs Radar shows that V.I.E.S contributes to all the environmental SDGs, particularly significantly through **raising awareness of environmental challenges and developing training tools (SDG4) and promoting sustainable lifestyles (SDG11)**. Environmental projects and advocacy (SDG 15) are also strong contributions of volunteering, whereas efforts in climate action (SDG 13), such as mapping and technical assessments, should be further developed.

The study also highlighted **the cross-disciplinary and innovative dimensions of V.I.E.S practices, which enable interactions between major issues**, particularly environmental and social ones.

*We plant trees and grow fruit and vegetables organically in a region known for high soil salinity. And it works: vegetation and biodiversity are thriving and it's remarkable. It's quite revolutionary on our scale because the ecovillage is revitalising an underprivileged rural region, marked by a rural exodus of young people.*

VSI volunteer in Senegal, 2024

### 3.2 V.I.E.S as a Vehicle for Partnerships



**78 %** of the surveyed organisations believe that **partnerships are essential**, and that collaboration with other stakeholders (NGOs, businesses, local authorities) can enrich projects and broaden their scope.



For **68.7 %** of host organisations, **participating in long-term projects constitutes a lever** for volunteering missions that create positive and lasting effects on the environment.



More than a third of host organisations (**35.5 %**) consider that **being part of a multi-stakeholder volunteering programme** also contributes to this.

### 3.3 Volunteer' Commitment Strengthened after their Mission

Volunteering experience has a profound influence on career paths: more than half of volunteers (50.6 %) report that their mission had a **direct impact on their orientation towards an environment-related career**. This effect is even more marked among those who have been introduced to environmental techniques or tools during their mission (up to 55.2 %).

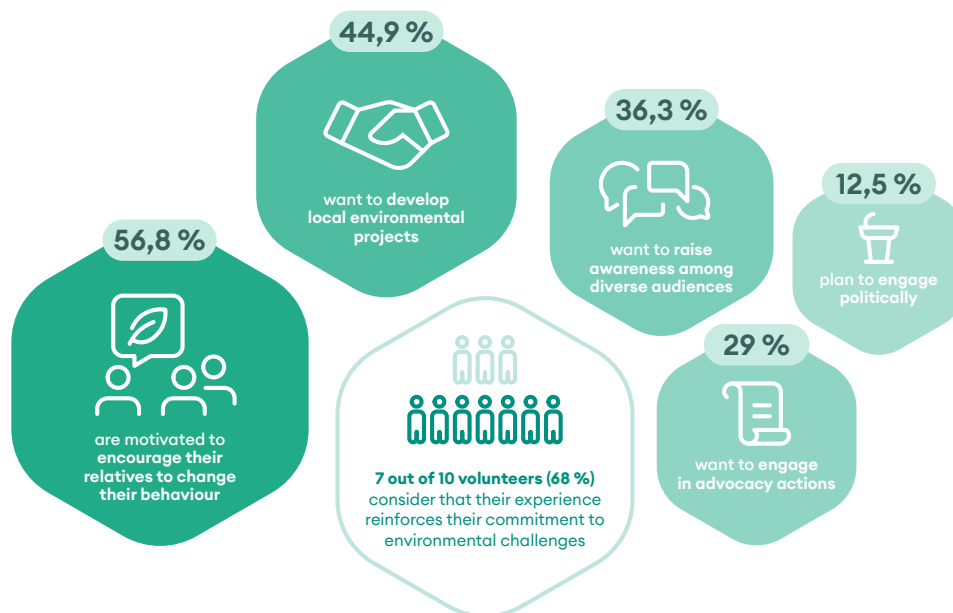
*Initially trained in law, this first international experience in an NGO confirmed my desire to develop professionally in the environmental sector.*

SCI volunteer in Peru, 2023



### 3 Effects of Volunteering on Environmental Challenges

Nearly 7 out of 10 volunteers (68 %) consider that **their experience reinforces their commitment to environmental challenges**, which they wish to continue in new forms and on different scales:



The volunteering experience therefore **has an impact on the long-term civic commitment path**, with multiplier effects on the volunteers' entourage and their community.

*Thanks to this mission, I'm now very interested in setting up an agroecological farm in my region.*




VSI volunteer from Chad on mission in Senegal, 2023

For nearly two-thirds of volunteers (64.7 %), **the volunteering experience encouraged them to adopt more sustainable behaviours in their daily lives**, such as recycling, reducing their carbon footprint or taking part in local environmental protection initiatives.

Finally, this post-volunteer commitment is fuelled by strong motivations, such as **the quest for meaning and the response to eco-anxiety**, a phenomenon that affects nearly a third of young adults according to a study by French Agency for Ecological Transition (ADEME), in April 2025.

### 3.4 Stronger Environmental Commitment from Host Organisations

While 33.7 % of host organisations are making progress on environmental challenges independently of the V.I.E.S, **61.5 % have stated that the volunteers' commitment is leading them to adopt better environmental practices daily** (e.g. in relation to waste management, responsible eating and consumption). In addition, surveyed organisations heavily rely on these schemes and associated partnerships to:

-  **Strategically**, strengthen their commitment to global challenges (45.2 %)
-  **Rationally**, favour cross-cutting approaches to integrating environmental challenges into their projects (37.9 %)
-  **Operationally**, assess their greenhouse gas emissions impact (16.9 %)



These results are part of a wider reflection on the ecological footprint of the V.I.E.S. sector. Driven by the desire for consistency with the values and principles of international solidarity, France Volontaires and its members are working to put in place practices aimed at reducing the negative externalities inherent in the sector's activities through sustainable mobility, support for local partners and the calculation of emissions avoided during missions.

## Senegal and the Volunteers for the Great Green Wall Programme

Senegal has a long tradition of hosting and mobilising volunteers, dating back to the 1970s. Volunteering is fully in line with the priority areas of Franco-Senegalese cooperation, such as support for young people, sport, decentralised cooperation, **environmental challenges - particularly the fight against deforestation and climate change** - and the development of initiatives in areas least covered by the conventional schemes.

The **Volunteers for the Great Green Wall (V-GGW) programme** was launched to support the pan-African Great Green Wall initiative, focused on combating desertification and land degradation. Targeting four African countries (Mauritania, Senegal, Chad, Djibouti) as well as France, the programme has mobilised different volunteering schemes (VSI, VEC, SCI, national volunteering) in an **intercultural approach**. Led by France Volontaires with the support of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Civic Service Agency, this first thematic programme to promote a multi-stakeholder approach has helped to

mobilise people around the challenges of combating desertification, develop the skills of those involved, raise awareness of climate change among young people and strengthen cooperation between organisations and networks. A total of 62 volunteers, including **11 in Senegal**, were mobilised, supported by communication, networking and promotion of local initiatives.

As part of this program, **Joël Ewolo** committed as an international solidarity volunteer (VSI) with the **Senegalese Agency for Reforestation and the GGM** to help promote forest products other than timber (game, fruit, seeds...). For him, this experience has been a true model of resilience, a process in which the present prepares the future for generations to come: *"It's important to raise awareness because by acting correctly today, efforts will have a significant and lasting impact"*. Originally from Cameroon, he is part of the **"South-South" volunteers'** cohort and chose volunteering to contribute to a concrete and meaningful initiative on his continent.





## V.I.E.S for a Sustainable Ocean

All over the world, volunteers are mobilised by various organisations on missions linked to environmental challenges, particularly ocean protection. Preserving marine biodiversity, environmental education, combating plastic and chemical pollution... **volunteering is an innovative tool in response to ocean challenges.**

While in September 2024, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) announced that a seventh planetary limit (out of nine), that of ocean acidification, was about to be crossed, the study reveals that only 19.2 % of the organisations surveyed are already taking action in this direction. However, **56.2 % of them express a genuine interest in being better informed**, which indicates potential that can be tapped into and a need for greater support.

Co-organised by the governments of France and Costa Rica, the third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) is being held in Nice, France, from 9 to 13 June 2025, on the theme of “Accelerating action and mobilising all stakeholders to conserve and sustainably use the ocean”. In line with **recommendation 7** of the study, the UNOC appears to be **a strategic opportunity to raise awareness and mobilise key stakeholders in the volunteering and Ocean ecosystems** around joint initiatives.

This is the context in which Riel Oronico, a volunteer from the Philippines, joined the Centre de Découverte Mer et Montagne in Nice as a Civic Service volunteer, thanks to funding from the French Embassy in the Philippines. She contributes to promoting the **natural and cultural underwater heritage** to a variety of audiences, particularly those **remote from the sea** (people with disabilities, phobic audiences or those living in areas geographically remote from the coast).

As part of the study, a focus group brought together stakeholders already involved in ocean-related volunteering and marine professionals who might engage in the future. **Four key leverage points** were identified to strengthen V.I.E.S’s role in ocean protection:

- Exchanges of best practice between peers on a local or regional scale, including the completion of diagnostics
- Specific volunteer training on ocean-related challenges
- Intercultural integration of volunteer projects, particularly through language and local cultural awareness
- Development of volunteering programs specifically dedicated to oceanic challenges



## 4

# Main Recommendations

Adopting a forward-looking approach, the results of the study led to recommendations at several levels, including strategic and operational ideas formulated by the consultants in charge of the study, and co-constructed with the members and partners of France Volontaires.

1

**Develop a common analytical framework** applicable to all V.I.E.S stakeholders to better measure the contribution to environmental challenges

2

**Develop data collection tools** at different levels of action, in particular the **SDGs Radar**, and support their appropriation by sector stakeholders and volunteers

3

**Develop a range of specialist training** on environmental challenges adapted to local contexts and the content of missions

4

**Support volunteers, during and after their mission, in setting up initiatives** linked to environmental challenges, in particular through exchange networks

5

Pursue and deepen **the ongoing reflections on the environmental footprint and ecological transition** of the V.I.E.S sector

6

Strengthen the **role of France Volontaires' branches and Volunteering Centres as platforms for multi-stakeholder dialogue** on environmental challenges

7

**To take advantage of the international environmental agenda and its "Momentums" to launch strategic initiatives**, while strengthening the voice of volunteers in these international spaces

8

**Integrate V.I.E.S as a systematic lever of French public policies for sustainable development** and mobilise the funding necessary for its deployment

The full study is available on the France Volontaires website:

[france-volontaires.org/actualite/publication/etude-le-vies-comme-contribution-aux-enjeux-environnementaux/](https://france-volontaires.org/actualite/publication/etude-le-vies-comme-contribution-aux-enjeux-environnementaux/)

Contact:

[service.reconnaissance@france-volontaires.org](mailto:service.reconnaissance@france-volontaires.org)