

GLOBAL VOLUNTEERING OUTLOOK

Volunteering for Sustainable Futures: Evidence and Pathways Beyond 2030

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A collaboration between:
**France Volontaires
Forum**

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France Volontaires

Since 2009, France Volontaires has been the French platform for international volunteering, exchange, and solidarity (V.I.E.S). It is committed to two key missions:

- Promoting, supporting and developing international volunteering
- Enhancing the value and visibility of volunteers' commitment

Through its missions, France Volontaires contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promoting volunteering as a means of fostering civic participation and international solidarity.

Operator of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, France Volontaires is a public interest group (GIP) that brings together the State, local authorities and associations as part of a mission of general interest recognized by the law of August 4, 2021, as a transversal lever of action for France's solidarity development policy.

France Volontaires relies on six branches in mainland France and overseas territories, and on a network of about 20 Volunteering Centers in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania.



Global Volunteering Forum

The Global Volunteering Forum is a worldwide network of organisations that work with volunteers to advance sustainable development. It brings together civil society organisations and public agencies to share knowledge, improve practice and strengthen cooperation across the sector.

Forum works through three main areas:

- Convening members through its annual conference, webinars and communities of practice
- Carrying out research, and supporting research and knowledge exchange between practitioners and academics
- Developing standards and resources for good practice in volunteering

Forum members share a commitment to responsible, impactful volunteering, and to working together to strengthen the role of volunteering in sustainable development.

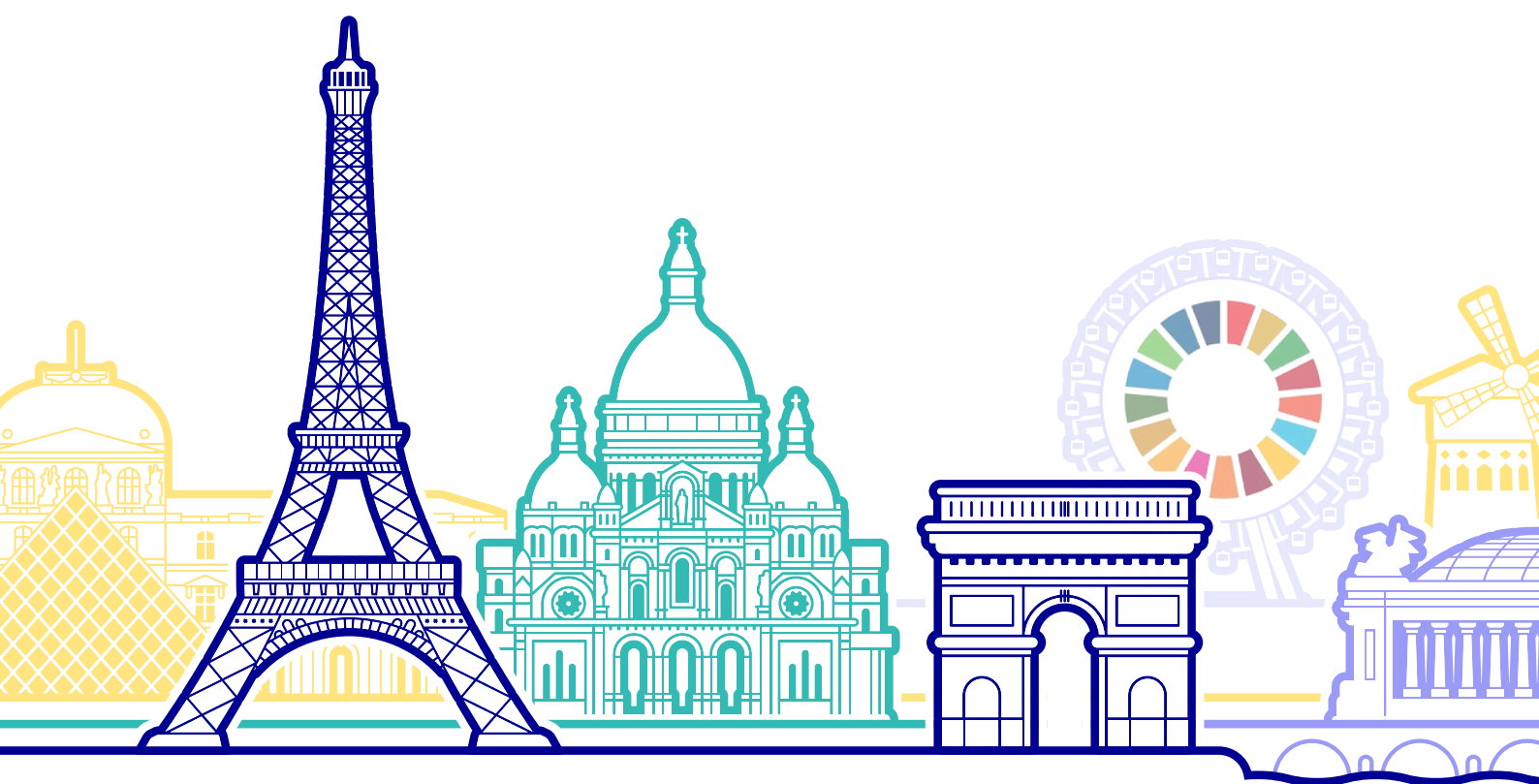
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Study context

This document was developed by Forum and France Volontaires in the context of international reflections on the future of volunteering and its contribution to sustainable development beyond 2030. As the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approaches, development actors are facing profound transformations: the multiplication of global crises, evolving models of international cooperation, the growing emphasis on locally led approaches, increasing constraints on development financing, and the emergence of new forms of civic engagement. In this context, important questions are being raised about how volunteering can continue to contribute effectively to development objectives while also responding to growing expectations regarding equity, inclusion, and sustainability.

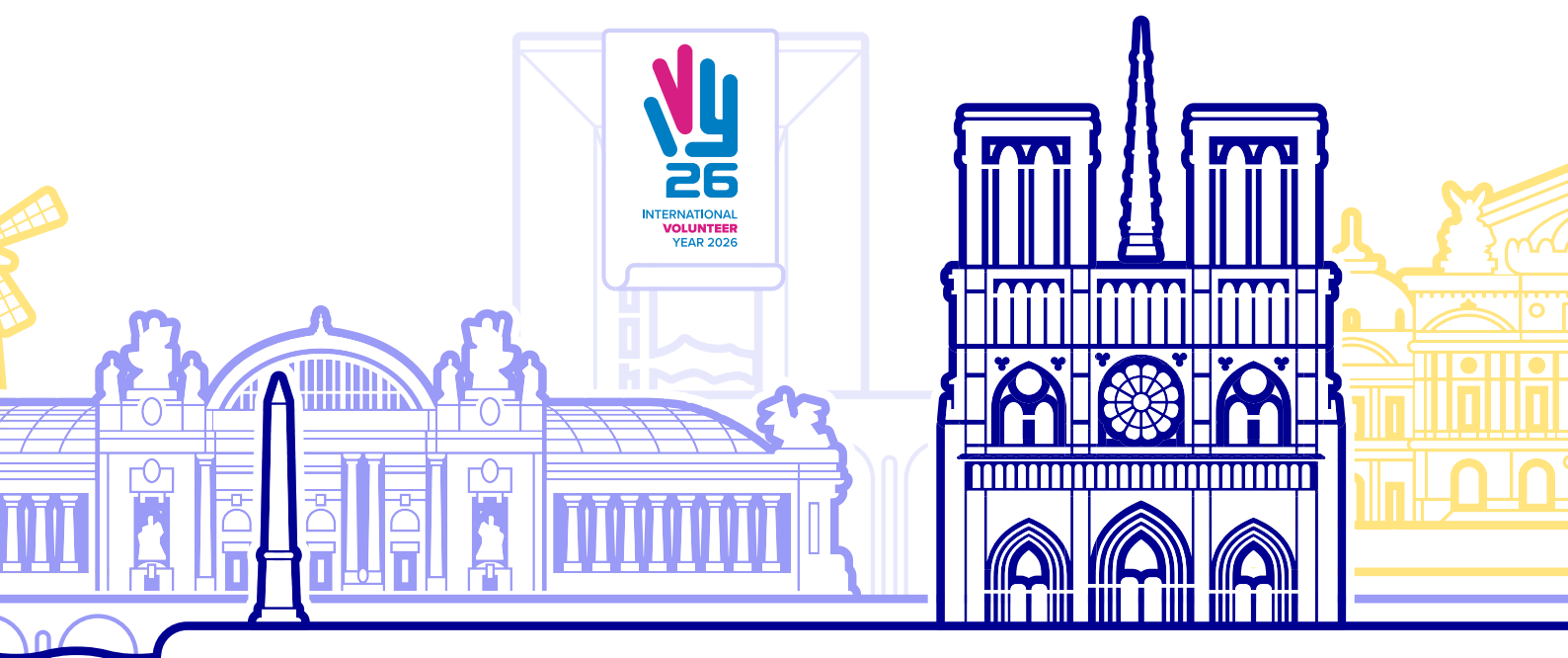


This study is also part of the momentum generated by the International Volunteer Year (IVY 2026), which seeks to highlight the contribution of volunteering to contemporary global challenges. It builds on the work undertaken in recent years by Forum and its partners and contributes to a broader global dialogue on the place of volunteering within future international development frameworks.

The production of this document also contributes to discussions surrounding the 2026 edition of the annual conference of the Global Volunteering Forum (IVCO), that brings together volunteer involving organisations, researchers, government representatives, donors, international agencies, and civil society actors. However, this document is intended to extend well beyond the scope of the conference itself. It is designed as a reference resource to inform strategic discussions on the future of volunteering and to support ongoing reflection in the fields of volunteering, international cooperation, and sustainable development. More specifically, the study seeks to analyse how different forms of volunteering contribute to achieving the SDGs, as well as to

examine approaches for better measuring and evidencing volunteering's impact. Also, it explores issues of participation, engagement, and inclusion, particularly among young people, it analyses the role of volunteering in building partnerships and cooperation dynamics, and, lastly, it aims to identify pathways for strengthening the recognition, relevance, and contribution of volunteering beyond 2030.

Drawing on a literature review and interviews conducted with experts, researchers, and practitioners from different regions of the world, this report seeks to identify what current knowledge allows us to conclude about the contribution of volunteering to sustainable development. It examines key lessons emerging from both research and practice, highlights areas of consensus and debate, and proposes reflections and recommendations to support the future evolution of the sector. The aim is not only to demonstrate the value of volunteering, but to gain a better understanding of the conditions under which, for which stakeholders and through which mechanisms it contributes to social change and sustainable development.



Executive summary

The United Nations estimates that about 2.1 billion people volunteer every month,¹ contributing their time, knowledge, and relationships to strengthen communities, improve health and education, respond to crises, and support sustainable development. Despite volunteering's scale and significance, fundamental questions remain about how it should be understood, measured, supported, and positioned within the development space beyond 2030. At a time of shrinking financing and increasing emphasis on locally led approaches, there is a renewed opportunity to rethink volunteering's role in achieving sustainable development.

Drawing on interviews with researchers, volunteer involving organisations, practitioners and representatives from the public and private sectors, alongside an extensive review of recent literature, this paper explores what current evidence tells us about volunteering's contribution to development and the Sustainable Development Goals. It identifies the key themes emerging across research and practice, highlights areas of broad consensus as well as ongoing debate, and considers how volunteering can remain relevant, equitable and effective beyond 2030. The overview below summarises the paper's principal findings and recommendations, while the sections that follow examine the evidence, tensions, and opportunities in greater depth and invite continued conversations about the future of volunteering.



PHOTO CREDIT: Cuso International

Overview of key findings

Volunteering...

...is not a fixed concept.

Definitions of volunteering continue to evolve, reflecting diverse forms of participation that are based in context and/or culture.

...is based on relationships.

Different approaches to volunteering can offer opportunities to understand contexts, build trust and support meaningful impact. However, the impact of volunteering is shaped by existing power dynamics and programme design, highlighting the importance of approaches that promote equity and inclusion.

...benefits many.

Those who benefit from volunteering are a diverse and context-dependent group of communities and volunteers themselves.

...contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

There is broad consensus that volunteering contributes to progress across multiple SDGs, although demonstrating and attributing its contribution is complex.

...is best understood through multiple forms of evidence.

Measuring its impact requires a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches that capture both outcomes and the processes that contribute to them. There is also growing interest and recognition of the value of longitudinal studies to better understand how the impacts of volunteering emerge, evolve and endure over time.

...requires investment.

Meaningful volunteering depends on investments in volunteers, volunteer involving organisations (VIOs) and the systems that support participation.

...is shaped by its enabling environment.

Supportive policies, legal frameworks, institutional arrangements and investments can help promote, strengthen and sustain volunteering.

...is adapting to changing social, technological and funding contexts.

Digital, hybrid and in-person forms of volunteering are increasingly coexisting, creating new opportunities for participation and engagement.

...is shaped by power and context.

The impact of volunteering depends on who participates, who benefits, who defines priorities and how volunteering is designed and supported. More equitable and locally led approaches can help strengthen volunteering's contribution to development.

And participation in volunteering is not equally accessible. Opportunities to volunteer are shaped by social, economic, geographic and institutional factors that influence who can participate and who benefits.

Recommendations – initial approach

Taken together, these findings point to six interrelated recommendations for strengthening volunteering's contribution to sustainable development beyond 2030.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Recognise all forms of volunteering

Volunteering takes many forms, including formal, informal, non-programmed, community-based, digital and hybrid models. Future approaches should better recognise and value this diversity, ensuring less visible forms of volunteering, especially at the community level, are acknowledged alongside more structured and institutionally supported models.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Reconsider evidence

Understanding volunteering's contribution requires approaches that capture not only scale and outputs, but also relationships, participation and longer-term change. Future measurement efforts should balance consistency and comparability with the flexibility needed to reflect different contexts and forms of volunteering.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Strengthen governance and enabling environments for volunteering

Effective volunteering depends on supportive policies, institutions, organisations and community structures that enable participation. Greater attention should be paid to creating environments that support volunteering while remaining grounded in local priorities and diverse forms of civic engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Invest in volunteering infrastructure

Volunteering is not without cost and depends on adequate support systems, including coordination, training, safeguarding and long-term organisational capacity. Sustainable approaches to volunteering require investment in the conditions that allow volunteers and VIOs to contribute effectively over time.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Make volunteering equitable and accessible

Participation in volunteering is shaped by social, political, economic, geographic and institutional factors. Future efforts should focus on reducing barriers to participation, expanding access to opportunities and ensuring that diverse forms of volunteering are recognised, valued and supported.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Strengthen locally led and equitable partnerships

Volunteering should be grounded in local priorities and supported through partnerships that promote shared decision-making, mutual learning and equitable participation. Future approaches should address power imbalances and ensure that diverse voices shape volunteering's direction and contribution to development.

These recommendations align closely with the actions identified in the [Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering](#).

Volunteering at a crossroads

As the 2030 deadline for the SDGs approaches, and during the United Nations' International Volunteer Year in 2026, it is clear volunteering makes a significant contribution and helps achieve these goals.

Drawing on discussions with researchers, volunteer involving organisations (VIOs), practitioners, and public and private sector representatives, as well as reviewing a wide range of literature, the evidence shows there is something about volunteer work that positively impacts both the communities in which the volunteers work and the volunteers themselves.

Yet, despite this consensus, volunteering faces several challenges in terms of how it is understood, measured, supported and positioned within future development frameworks. Challenges are compounded by increasingly constrained development financing, changing global priorities and a growing need for more equitable and locally led partnerships.

“At some point we should reflect: If we understand that volunteering is still a valid modality for change and impact, how might we convey this better? The context we are operating in is increasingly complex and requires new evidence around impact and sustainability. Asking this question helps to really showcase the impact and the work and the focus of volunteers and partners.”

Mel Gow
CEO, AVI

This paper emerged from a series of conversations and a review of literature exploring the role of volunteering in development beyond 2030. It

examines what current evidence and different perspectives suggest about volunteering's future relevance, value and contribution. Its purpose is to identify themes, tensions and opportunities that may shape volunteering in the years ahead.

Several insights emerged consistently. First, volunteering is not a fixed concept; definitions continue to evolve across cultures, contexts and forms of participation. Second, while there is broad consensus that volunteering contributes to development and supports progress toward the SDGs, understanding and demonstrating that contribution remains complex. Third, volunteering benefits a diverse range of people and communities, but these benefits are shaped by context, relationships and the conditions under which volunteering takes place. Fourth, meaningful volunteering requires investment in volunteers, VIOs and supporting systems. Finally, volunteering is shaped by broader questions of inclusion, power and participation, highlighting the importance of recognising diverse forms of volunteering and ensuring opportunities are accessible and responsive to local priorities.

These findings point toward a broader conversation about the future of volunteering. As development actors consider what comes after the SDGs, questions are emerging about how volunteering should be measured, recognised, financed, governed and supported. There is increasing interest in understanding what is referred to as informal, non-programmed, community-based and/or everyday forms of volunteering;² improving approaches to measuring both tangible and relational outcomes; creating enabling environments for participation; adapting to digital and hybrid forms of volunteering; and ensuring sustainable support for volunteer systems.

This paper brings together perspectives from research and practice to contribute to an ongoing discussion about how volunteering can remain relevant, valued and effective within a rapidly changing global context. It presents recommendations for the future of volunteering,

aims to inform conversations about the role volunteering may play in development agendas beyond 2030 and provides an opportunity for dialogue and discussion at the 2026 Global Volunteering Forum in Paris.

Methodological note

This work represents perspectives drawn from both literature and interviews with a range of actors. The process involved consulting recent literature and research (primarily within the last ten years) that discussed evidence of the impact of volunteering on the SDGs and in development, including institutional and governmental reporting as well as academic research papers.

The following research interview questions were developed based on the literature, with specific focus on the February 2026 insights paper entitled *A Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering: Framing a Global Dialogue for the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development*:

- What does the strongest available evidence tell us about how volunteering contributes to achieving the SDGs?
- In which areas of development do you believe volunteering has demonstrated the most meaningful impact?
- In terms of meaningful impact, how do you view the impact on volunteers themselves?
- Which forms of volunteering remain under-recognised or insufficiently measured in current research and policy frameworks?
- What structural conditions enable or constrain volunteering's ability to generate meaningful development outcomes?
- What methodological approaches show the greatest promise for measuring volunteering's impact on development and progress toward the SDGs?
- How can measurement approaches better capture the long-term or indirect impacts of volunteering, such as social capital, civic participation or institutional change?
- What needs to change to make sure volunteers contribute to accelerating progress in achieving the SDGs?
- What role should governments, donors, international institutions and the private sector play in strengthening the enabling environment for volunteering?
- How should volunteering be positioned within global development frameworks after 2030 to remain relevant and effective in addressing future global challenges?

During interviews, participants recommended additional interviewees and material for review. In this manner, the methodology was very much that of a snowball sample in the interest of developing an overview of conversations about evidence of volunteer impact. Generative artificial intelligence (AI) was used for transcription as well as summaries of interview transcripts and selected documentation. There were many overlapping and intersecting perspectives, so this paper attempts to communicate consensus for further conversation and consideration.

What counts as volunteering?

According to the United Nations, “the terms volunteering, volunteerism and voluntary activities refer to a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor.”³

“The more interesting question is not so much how we define volunteering... but who is allowed to define it – and what happens when those definitions travel and do work in different places.”

Matt Baillie Smith

Professor of Global Development and Dean of Research Culture, Northumbria University

A recurring theme is clarifying what is meant when we discuss volunteering. There are many types of volunteering relevant to development, and the meaning of the term varies depending on context. Do we mean North-South, South-South or South-North volunteers who travel to volunteer? Local volunteers working within their own communities? Diaspora volunteers? Corporate volunteers sponsored by their workplaces? Young people volunteering at home or abroad? Faith-based volunteers working within their religious networks?

Many of these forms of volunteering are part of organisation- or agency-based projects and programmes, often referred to as “formal” or “programmed” volunteering.⁴ Of volunteering globally, however, the majority takes place outside of formal structures, and its contributions often remain invisible.⁵ Distinguishing between these two categories of volunteering risks overlooking institutions and practices that may not fit models developed in the Global North. Terms such as “non-programmed” versus “programmed” have been used to avoid the reality that certain types of volunteering not run by institutions, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), risk being left out of consideration despite their contributions and potential impact.⁶

Volunteering categories can unintentionally marginalise certain types of volunteering practices. Questioning the firmness of these categories helps to disrupt the power dynamics involved in the classification, but it also opens the door to appreciating the variety of ways that volunteering is experienced. This approach draws on “assemblage thinking”⁷, which avoids fixing a concept according to a particular context or universal definition.⁸ Rather, the goal is to understand volunteering as a process that functions differently in different places by different communities, institutions and people.

For example, volunteering may be viewed as apolitical or depoliticised, but it can also include activism and dissent, especially when young people challenge gender or other social norms, or when individuals volunteer for opposition parties or movements that are challenged by governments. Volunteering can also be viewed as embedded in culture, as it moves from this potential disruption of power and norms to the creation of shared meanings, values and understandings. This can include fostering cultures of solidarity, reciprocity and respect. From this perspective, volunteering becomes a means of working together and building society; individuals

are expected to become involved with each other and their communities, prioritising trust, credibility and sustained engagement.⁹ Volunteering is therefore a tool for partnership, co-creation¹⁰ and the support of democratic and socially just communities.

When thinking about these types of shifts in definitions and categories, a translation to practice is also important. From a practical perspective, some organisations have been shifting away from traditional placement-based models, where volunteers have a specific job description or purpose, toward approaches that emphasise partnership, collaboration and shared learning. The concept of “blended” volunteering involves different types of volunteers working together, and organisations such as VSO have been particularly active in describing and setting forth parameters for this type of volunteering.¹¹ In these models, boundaries are blurred and engagements are fluid,¹² encouraging reciprocal learning and exchange between volunteers from different contexts and host communities of varying forms.¹³

Focusing on a blended approach and flexible definitions means volunteering becomes more adaptive and more context-specific, opening increased opportunities for South-South exchanges, hybrid approaches and a range of long- and short-term opportunities.¹⁴ However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, new forms of remote volunteering were developed out of necessity.¹⁵ New and adapted models now reflect not only technological shifts, but also changing expectations around participation, accessibility and impact.

As a result, volunteering is best understood as a spectrum of practices, tools and conceptions that vary across contexts. Sometimes volunteering is driven by personal interest, but it can also be shaped by social norms, community expectations, civic responsibility, religious values or traditions of mutual support and reciprocity.¹⁶ To understand its impact, it is imperative to consider the many forms it can take in addressing development challenges.



PHOTO CREDIT - France Volontaires

Who benefits, and how?

Let's begin with the range of individuals and communities who potentially benefit. Volunteering operates across multiple sectors, including youth, health care, education, poverty reduction, climate change, care for vulnerable populations and community partnerships, reflecting its broad relevance within social systems.¹⁷ The benefits are felt by community members, organisations where volunteers can be placed, and the volunteers themselves.

Participation in volunteering is associated with improved physical and mental health outcomes, including reduced stress, increased life satisfaction and stronger social connectedness.¹⁸ Recent evidence also points to reduced feelings of isolation and improvements in emotional health and well-being.¹⁹ Individual volunteers not only contribute to development outcomes, but also pursue personal, social and professional objectives.²⁰ This contributes to workforce development, particularly among young people, by supporting employability, social mobility, social and political capital, and longer-term economic involvement.²¹ In addition, volunteering allows individuals to see themselves as actors in development rather than recipients of development. Volunteering thereby helps to create agency.

But moving beyond this general sense of feeling the impact, it is more difficult to unpack the second part of the question: How does this happen?

Because volunteers are not only connected to the organisations they work with but also the communities they serve, they can build trust, respond quickly and adapt to local realities.²² This embeddedness allows volunteering to address needs that may not have been acknowledged, particularly among marginalised and vulnerable groups, while simultaneously strengthening volunteers' skills, capabilities and social participation.²³ Numerous academics and organisations have described the ways in which international volunteering assists in capacity strengthening, with a focus on

collaborative approaches between volunteers and host partners/communities.²⁴ Additionally, in terms of international volunteering, longer-term placements are often associated with deeper and more sustained impacts, while shorter stints may offer broader reach but less depth.²⁵ In this way, volunteering is adaptable in how it mobilises expertise, resources and innovation; the dual individual and collective nature of its contributions helps to explain how it works to support change.²⁶

In-country volunteers, who are sometimes referred to as local, national and/or community-based, also play critical roles in delivering services, supporting behaviour change and strengthening accountability. Because these volunteers are part of the systems they support, their contributions are often more sustainable and can be strongly aligned with local priorities.²⁷ Locally rooted volunteering strengthens trust, reinforces social norms and supports collective action, all of which help build community, and this is essential for sustained development outcomes.²⁸

In contexts where formal government systems are limited or under-resourced, volunteers can make all the difference, such as by sustaining service delivery, particularly at the local level. This is particularly relevant when growing demands face increasingly limited resources. Recent analysis further positions volunteering as capable of extending the reach, uptake and sustainability of development interventions, particularly in contexts where formal systems face these kinds of capacity constraints.²⁹ It is therefore possible, through formal volunteering programmes, for

volunteers to support organisations to extend their reach, strengthen relationships with communities and support service delivery and development initiatives. These contributions help organisations connect with populations that may be difficult to reach, while building trust and social cohesion.³⁰

However, the role of volunteers in service delivery remains contested. While volunteers can complement and extend the reach of existing services and systems, care should be taken to avoid relying on volunteers to fill gaps created by insufficient funding or staffing. This contribution should not be understood as a replacement for paid labour or masking resource constraints. For example, there is significant critical discussion of how community health-care workers who volunteer their time create a system where

unpaid labour props up the health-care system in a way that is not sustainable.³¹ All of this means, however, that low rates of volunteering within specific programmes or through agencies does not necessarily reflect low levels of community volunteering.³²

Even without specific programmes, volunteering happens. In many contexts, this means community networks, mutual aid, faith groups and other informal or non-programmed structures. As previously described, volunteering is closely linked to cultural norms, social expectations and shared responsibilities. Individuals may wish to become involved not only because they want to contribute, but also because their participation strengthens community relationships, develops skills, expands networks and creates future opportunities.³³



PHOTO CREDIT : Crossroads International

How do we know?

There is a broad consensus that volunteering contributes meaningfully to development outcomes. A number of reports emphasise its large-scale contribution to these outcomes, and speaking with various parties leads to a similar conclusion. If we are aware volunteering benefits both communities and individuals, and we can observe the processes that make this happen, how do we answer the following question: What is the nature, scale and strength of volunteer contribution, particularly when examined across contexts?

“We are still much better at counting volunteer inputs – how many volunteers, how many hours – than we are at demonstrating the pathways through which volunteering contributes to development outcomes or measuring its longer-term effects.”

Ben Lough

*Director of Social Innovation,
Gies College of Business, University
of Illinois Urbana-Champaign*

Efforts to measure volunteering remain a challenge due to variations in definitions, methodologies and data collection systems.³⁴ As mentioned, volunteering itself is not a fixed or universally defined concept; rather, it is a socially constructed practice that varies across cultural and institutional contexts.³⁵ Given patterns of participation differ significantly across populations and countries,³⁶ with findings often mixed or context-specific, how can we assess the impact of volunteering?

There is an overall sense that mixed-methods approaches are essential. Quantitative data can capture scale and collect information on the numbers of volunteers and the amount of time spent, for example, but this alone does not account for the diversity of volunteer experiences

or provide understanding of the value of volunteer work. Also necessary are qualitative approaches, including participatory methods such as photovoice, interviews, focus groups, life histories, case studies and storytelling. Many practitioners, as well as the UN’s 2026 World’s Volunteerism 2026 report, noted storytelling is a critical part of understanding and communicating volunteering’s impact.

When it is difficult to quantify change, narratives can better capture the relationships built, as well as personal transformation and community experiences. These ways of collecting data offer the necessary insight to reflect the contexts in which volunteering happens and the reality of the volunteering experience. At the same time, many organisations and institutions, particularly smaller or community-based organisations (CBOs), may not have the capacity, technical expertise or resources required to establish comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems capable of systematically engaging in the types of practices that can demonstrate long-term impact. This raises important questions regarding whose volunteering is being measured, what forms of evidence are prioritised, and which organisations can produce that evidence.

This being said, there are a number of recent frameworks and approaches that seek to support more holistic thinking about volunteering’s value and impact. For example, the Total Value Model, developed by Voluntare in Spain, assesses

corporate volunteering by considering the relationship between economic value, private value and social value (or value generated for society).³⁷ When United Nations Volunteers (UNV) released their 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism report in December 2025, the focus was measurement. Launched alongside this document, which takes stock of how volunteering impact has been assessed, was the UNV's new Global Index of Volunteer Engagement.³⁸ This multi-dimensional index looks at the value of volunteering to the individual, communities and societies; the economy; and the establishment of an enabling environment.

Both approaches offer opportunities to move beyond simple counts of volunteers and hours toward a more comprehensive understanding of value. However, they aren't necessarily applicable tools for all organisations, as they require data, resources and institutional capacity that may not be available in many contexts, particularly among smaller NGOs or CBOs.

Whether working in the field of volunteering or engaging in research, many interviewees highlighted the importance of longitudinal studies in better understanding volunteering's longer-term impacts on individuals, organisations and communities. Longitudinal studies examine

change over extended periods of time, often beyond the lifespan of a specific project or program. The underlying assumption is some volunteering outcomes, particularly those related to relationships, civic participation, behaviour change and social cohesion, may take years rather than months to emerge. Some organisations, such as the Australian Volunteers Program (AVP), have already undertaken this kind of work, while others are actively discussing its importance. These types of studies often require substantial financial, technical and institutional resources and may be more feasible for larger organisations and formal volunteering programmes than, for instance, community-led forms of volunteerism.

Whether from the perspective of a volunteer, development professional, researcher, government official or others working in the sector, there is a desire to better understand and demonstrate impact. The focus on mixed method approaches combining quantitative and qualitative evidence, alongside longer-term learning and more holistic measurement frameworks, reflects a broader recognition that the value of volunteering can be assessed, but not through a single method or metric. Doing so requires flexibility, nuance and attention to context, much like the definition of volunteering itself.



Can we see the contribution of volunteering to the SDGs?

“Surveys consistently show that people believe volunteering matters enormously for the SDGs, and that perception is widespread across both volunteers and non-volunteers. That said, translating that perception into evidence of systems-level change is an ongoing challenge.”

Ben Lough

*Director of Social Innovation,
Gies College of Business, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign*

One of the most frequently discussed interview themes was the relationship between volunteering and locally led development. Participants noted volunteering can support local participation, strengthen connections between communities and development actors, and help ensure initiatives are informed by local knowledge and priorities. While local ownership involves broader questions of decision-making power, resources and accountability, volunteering can contribute by creating opportunities for communities to shape and influence development processes.

When volunteers come from the communities they serve, they often bring local knowledge, cultural

understanding and long-term commitment. These factors can contribute to more context-responsive approaches and strengthen connections between development initiatives and local priorities; for example, “a community health volunteer is often effective not only because she is present and doing the work, but also because she is known and trusted in ways that a government official or NGO worker from outside the community is not.”³⁹

As the world moves towards 2030, and as we consider the evidence of volunteering’s impact, are there other specific areas of the SDGs where we see significant contributions from volunteering?

“Volunteers in their masses contribute to GDP, and we’ve seen a fast-tracking of the SDGs through their effort.”

Emiliya Asadova

Policy Specialist, UN Volunteers Programme (UNV)



Good Health and Well-Being

The strongest evidence of volunteering contribution is found in the health and social sectors. Volunteers can support health promotion and disease prevention activities, community outreach, health education, referral systems, treatment adherence and connections between communities and formal health systems.⁴⁰ Roles of volunteers could include support for service delivery in the interest of prevention, awareness, treatment and trust-building as well as advocacy for reforms that enable equitable access to health information, services and resources. These contributions are particularly critical in contexts where access to services is limited. Volunteers help ensure services are not only available, but also understood, trusted and used.

It is important to note there is ongoing debate regarding the use of volunteer community health workers⁴¹ and the potential risks of relying on unpaid labour to support essential services.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

Community health volunteers in Mozambique⁴²

Research conducted through VSO's Valuing Volunteering programme in Mozambique provides an example of how volunteering can contribute to SDG 3. The study examined a community-based volunteering programme in Manica Province that mobilised more than 250 volunteers to work alongside government health services.

The volunteers supported home-based care, connected people with formal health services, identified health and social needs within communities, and provided support to orphaned and vulnerable children. The research found volunteers played an essential role in responding to local health challenges because they were trusted members of the communities they served and were able to identify needs that might otherwise go unnoticed.

One community member explained the volunteers' value by noting they were often the first to recognise when support was needed and to connect households with available services. Additionally, the importance of volunteers within Mozambique's health system

is reflected in the rapid expansion of volunteer-supported home-based care, which increased from 17,790 beneficiaries in 2004 to 99,122 in 2008. The study concluded community health volunteers were helping to support the health system in a substantial way, with community members describing volunteers as "often a lifeline for those affected by HIV/AIDS," highlighting their role in connecting communities with services, providing practical support and responding to health needs that might otherwise go unmet.

The research also highlighted these contributions depended on adequate support and recognition for volunteers. The report raised concerns about sustainability and emphasised volunteering should complement, rather than replace, properly resourced health systems. This reflects a broader theme within the volunteering literature: volunteers can strengthen health outcomes through relationships, trust and community engagement, but these contributions require investment and support if they are to be sustained.



Quality Education

Across communities and countries, through youth, church, community and other groups, programmed and non-programmed, volunteering plays a crucial role in supporting access to education and advancement in this regard, especially for children from marginalised backgrounds. Volunteer efforts are particularly instrumental in supporting improved literacy and numeracy, preparation for exams, mentoring educators and mobilising funding for educational expenses, among other things that contribute to enrolment, improved learning outcomes and advancement.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

Volunteers supporting access to education for marginalised children⁴³

An example of volunteering's contribution to SDG 4 can be found in Educate A Child programmes operating across several countries including Pakistan, India, Nigeria, Mali, Niger and Syria. As of 2020, more than 55,400 volunteers were supporting efforts to enrol and retain over 3.7 million out-of-school children. Volunteers played a variety of roles, including working as community teachers, supporting school-based committees, engaging parents and helping address social and cultural barriers that prevent children from accessing education.

The report highlights volunteers were particularly effective because they were often members of the

communities they served. As noted in the study, projects viewed volunteers as “valuable resources who are familiar with the local environment and culture,” helping to generate “community buy-in and ownership.” This local knowledge enabled volunteers to build trust with families, encourage school participation and support children who might otherwise remain excluded from education systems.

The research also found volunteers contributed not only to access to education but also sustained change over time by supporting community structures and strengthening local capacity.



Gender Equality

Volunteering contributes to advancing gender equality and inclusion through community involvement, awareness-raising and support services. Volunteers often address barriers faced by women, girls and marginalised groups, particularly when their interventions and activities are rooted in local contexts.⁴⁴ However, volunteering systems can also reflect existing social inequalities.⁴⁵ Gendered divisions of labour persist, with women often overrepresented in roles that are less visible or less valued,⁴⁶ such as those related to care. Women are disproportionately represented in volunteering that is not connected to specific programmes or projects, and this translates to lack of recognition.⁴⁷ These dynamics extend to international volunteering, where access to opportunities may also be uneven.⁴⁸ Addressing these imbalances requires adaptations to the design of volunteering programmes, ensuring equitable access and recognition across different forms of participation.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

Volunteering and gender equality⁴⁹

Research conducted in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda examined how international development volunteers contributed to gender equality and women's empowerment through their work with local partner organisations. Drawing on interviews with partner organisations, the study found volunteers supported gender equality not only through specific projects and training activities, but also through everyday interactions, relationship-building and sharing knowledge and experiences.

Partner organisations reported volunteers helped strengthen confidence in gender equality programming and provided exposure to alternative ways of thinking about women's leadership and participation. The study's key findings include how

volunteers' interactions with staff and community members helped create opportunities for dialogue that challenged existing assumptions about gender roles and women's empowerment. In some cases, volunteers also supported women's economic empowerment initiatives, including programmes designed to strengthen women's participation in agricultural production and income-generating activities.

Additionally, the study suggests volunteering's contribution to gender equality often occurs through relational processes rather than easily measured outputs. By supporting learning, confidence-building, knowledge exchange and discussions around gender norms, volunteers helped create spaces where attitudes and practices could begin to change.



Decent Work and Economic Growth

Researchers and interviewees noted volunteering can help individuals build valued workplace skills and connections. Through volunteering, people may gain practical experience, access mentors and develop professional and social networks. In some contexts, volunteering is intentionally linked to workforce development. For example, in Malaysia, volunteering has been embedded within post-secondary education to help students develop skills, gain experience and improve their employment prospects upon graduation.⁵⁰ While these experiences may contribute to future livelihoods and career opportunities, the relationship between volunteering and employment is not always direct. Access to volunteering opportunities is often shaped by factors such as income, education, location and available time.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

Volunteering, skills and pathways to work in Uganda⁵¹

Research with young refugees and other youth volunteers in Uganda found many young people engage in volunteering as a way to gain skills, build networks and improve their chances of securing employment.

As one researcher explained, volunteers often participate because “they hope that after volunteering they will be able to get jobs” and see volunteering as “a way of getting into institutions and be[ing] employed.” The research also found concrete examples where volunteering helped young people access employment opportunities.

One participant described how refugee volunteers working in education programmes were later employed as teachers after building experience and professional connections through their volunteer roles.

Ultimately, in these instances, volunteering provided opportunities for skills development, work experience and networking that could support transitions into paid employment.

The study also cautions against assuming volunteering automatically leads to decent work. Researchers found access to volunteering opportunities was often shaped by existing inequalities, including education levels, qualifications and socio-economic status. As one government official remarked, “For us, we don’t believe a poor man can volunteer. A poor man is actually looking for a way of survival.” The study concludes volunteering can contribute to employability and livelihoods, but its benefits are unevenly distributed and depend heavily on the opportunities available, the resources volunteers can access and broader labour market conditions.



Climate Action

Volunteering plays an important role, though often under-documented, in climate and environmental action. Climate challenges require locally grounded, adaptive and community-driven responses.⁵² Volunteers contribute to awareness-raising, community mobilisation, behaviour change initiatives, environmental stewardship and local conservation efforts.

In terms of the scale and nature of these contributions, research has examined France Volontaires' main international volunteering programmes, delivered through the *Volontariat international d'échange et de solidarité (V.I.E.S)* framework, particularly with regard to the impact of volunteers on environmental sustainability and climate change.^{53 54} However, more research would help to increase understanding of these impacts. Additionally, the scale and urgency of climate challenges highlight the limits of volunteer-based approaches alone, reinforcing the need for volunteering to complement, rather than substitute for, adequately resourced and systemic climate interventions.⁵⁵ This could also include other environment and climate-related goals such as 11, 12, 14, and 15.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

Digital volunteering and environmental action in China⁵⁶

China provides an example of how volunteering is adapting to new technologies and contributing to environmental and climate-related goals. According to Professor Braven Zhang, Founding Director of the Innovation Center for Risk Governance at Beijing Normal University, digital volunteering platforms have created new opportunities for large-scale public participation in environmental action. One digital volunteering initiative focused on environmental protection and forestry projects has engaged approximately 650 million users since 2023. Through the platform, individuals contribute their time, resources and participation to activities such as tree planting and environmental restoration, with more than 400 million trees reportedly planted.

A key feature of these initiatives is the use of digital technology to connect volunteers directly to environmental action. Participants can use digital maps on their mobile phones to see where trees have been planted and track the results of their

contributions. According to Zhang, this visibility is important because it helps “show the trees from your cell phone” and encourages behavioural change by making individual contributions more tangible and visible. Other platforms similarly allow participants to see exactly where their contributions are being directed, helping strengthen awareness and engagement around environmental issues.

This example highlights how volunteering is evolving beyond traditional in-person models. Digital volunteering can create new opportunities for participation at a scale that would otherwise be difficult to achieve, while also supporting environmental awareness, civic engagement and collective action. At the same time, further research is needed to better understand the long-term environmental impacts of these initiatives and how digital forms of volunteering contribute to climate and to the SDGs.



SDG 16

Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

In governance and peacebuilding contexts, volunteering supports accountability, participation and dialogue. Volunteers facilitate community involvement and contribute to more transparent, inclusive decision-making processes.⁵⁷ These contributions, while often difficult to measure, are essential for building responsive organisations and systems that encourage participation. Governance and civic engagement are central to sustainable development outcomes, positioning volunteering as a key enabler within these processes.⁵⁸

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

Community volunteers supporting peace and conflict resolution in Malawi⁵⁹

In Malawi, community volunteers were engaged through District Peace Committees established with support from UNDP. These committees brought together volunteers who served as monitors, mediators and educators to help address local conflicts and strengthen social cohesion. The volunteers worked directly with communities to identify tensions, facilitate dialogue and support the peaceful resolution of disputes before they escalated.

The initiative demonstrated how volunteers can contribute to stronger institutions by creating links between communities and formal governance structures. Through their role as mediators and trusted local actors, volunteers helped strengthen local mechanisms for conflict prevention and dispute resolution. According to UNV, the District Peace Committees enabled community volunteers to “successfully mediate local conflicts and electoral disputes” in several districts.



PHOTO CREDIT : France Volontaires



Partnerships for the Goals

Volunteering plays a key role in connecting people and organisations. Volunteers act as partnership development actors across sectors, serving as bridges between communities, government and organisations, and strengthening coordination and alignment.⁶⁰ These connections underpin effective global cooperation and contribute to the advancement of partnership-based approaches. Evidence suggests benefits are often most visible and recognised at the individual level, while broader economic and systemic contributions, such as those relating to increasing partnerships, receive less attention.⁶¹ This imbalance highlights ongoing challenges in how the impact of volunteering is understood, valued and communicated within development systems.⁶² It also points to the need for more deliberate efforts, such as those described earlier, in terms of articulating volunteering's role within complex, multi-party environments, particularly in shaping its positioning within a post-2030 development agenda.

CASE STUDY EXAMPLE

Volunteers supporting partnerships for sustainable development⁶³

According to UNV, volunteers have played an important role in bringing together governments, civil society organisations, community groups and development partners to contribute evidence and perspectives to national SDG processes.

In Cameroon, for example, UNV partnered with the Ministry of Youth and the Platform of Actors Working in Volunteering Cameroon to conduct a national analysis of volunteering's contribution to several SDGs, including SDG 17. The process brought together multiple groups to collect, validate and synthesise information that was later used to inform the country's Voluntary National Review. Similar approaches were used in Pakistan, Jamaica and Tuvalu, where

volunteers helped gather data, document case studies and connect organisations contributing to sustainable development.

Volunteers helped connect local organisations, governments and communities; supported the exchange of information and knowledge; and contributed to more inclusive development processes. Volunteering served as a mechanism for partnership-building, helping diverse groups work together toward shared development goals. As UNV notes, volunteers can support the collection of evidence, convene different parties and create opportunities for collaboration that strengthen national efforts to achieve the SDGs.

What enables and constrains volunteering?

“[Governments] should enable a friendly environment through policy, infrastructure and recognition by providing facilities and funding [...] If you don’t have national support from the government, if they don’t believe in volunteerism, it’s a challenge. So, you need recognition, policies, funding, etc. from a higher level for it to be workable.”

Satish Rao Appalanaidu

Former Board Member, Yayasan Sukarelawan Siswa

The reality: what both enables and constrains volunteering is the level of investment in the systems and resources needed to support volunteering itself. This includes capital investment as well as other non-monetary forms of investment. Overall, volunteering is not cost-free, though it is often considered to be. Therefore, even if individuals and communities are providing their time and abilities at no cost, there is a trade-off.

Decline in funding

One of the most significant constraints facing volunteering in development is the decline in available funding. This is related to the reduction in official development assistance (ODA), including most recently with countries like the United Kingdom announcing cuts to boost defence spending,⁶⁴ which has affected development actors across sectors. While ODA has declined as a policy priority worldwide since the 1960s, the United States, as the world’s largest economy, increased commitments steadily through the first decades of the 21st century until a steep drop over the past few years. This drop has also occurred in other parts of the world, reaching a historically large decrease of 23.1% between 2024 and 2025 alone.⁶⁵

The impact of these funding cuts has been widespread, and this, of course, includes volunteering initiatives and organisations that support them. Many international volunteering

programmes are either state-funded or rely on a single, typically government, donor, which stems from overall ODA budgets, despite significant cuts that occurred in the 2010s to volunteer cooperation specifically.^{66*} Given this trend, which is expected to continue into 2026,⁶⁷ many interviewees noted the challenges that declining resources pose for volunteering, in all its forms, and the people and communities who depend on their efforts.

Reduced funding affects not only volunteer programmes themselves, but also the broader systems that enable volunteering, including recruitment, training, coordination, management, monitoring and long-term support. As development funding becomes increasingly constrained, volunteering risks being viewed as a low-cost alternative rather than an activity that requires investment to be effective and sustainable. Several interviewees noted volunteering has become less of a funding priority in some development contexts, despite growing recognition of its contribution to sustainable development. This creates a challenge: while expectations of what volunteers can contribute often remain high, the resources needed to support meaningful and effective volunteering may be diminishing.

Decline in institutional and other supports

It is true that non-programmed volunteering often takes place without formal resources or support. However, investment in training, coordination, organisational capacity, recognition, safeguarding and long-term support can strengthen all types of volunteering and create conditions that enable it to contribute more effectively to development outcomes. When these supports are in place, volunteering is better positioned to support longer-term social engagement, strengthen community participation and contribute to sustainable development processes.

Additionally, to enlist and keep volunteers involved, it means offering both opportunities and supportive structures.⁶⁸ Where volunteering internationally is concerned, many volunteers return from their placements with strengthened commitment to development issues and often maintain personal and professional relationships with local counterparts and partner organisations.

But this does not always translate into continued participation. In many cases, individuals face challenges in identifying meaningful pathways for continued engagement once they return home.⁶⁹ It is worth noting, though, that international volunteers are significantly more likely to volunteer in their own communities on return, compared to pre-placement.⁷⁰ But insufficient institutional support, and difficulties in translating individual motivation into broader collective or systemic action, can constrain the longer-term impact of volunteering.⁷¹ It is therefore recommended VIOs develop strategies to support returned volunteers/programme alumni.

There is also acknowledgement volunteering requires enabling environments supported by volunteer-friendly policies, legal frameworks and national strategies. Although volunteering is positioned within broader strategic and development agendas, evidence suggests it does not only shape development outcomes but also reputations, influencing how communities and

countries are perceived and valued externally.⁷² VIOs such as AVI, CUSO International (Canada), France Volontaires, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) (South Korea), Peace Corps (USA), The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) (Germany), VSO (UK) and others who send volunteers internationally demonstrate the continued importance of these exchanges.

What is needed

There are growing calls for more deliberate investment in volunteering systems at both the global and organisational levels. The *Insights Paper: Call to Action on the Future of Volunteering*⁷³ highlights how volunteering requires an enabling environment supported by strong volunteer infrastructure, supportive policies, sustained cross-sector collaboration and adequate investment. It highlights the need to move beyond symbolic recognition of volunteering toward more systematic recognition through policies, funding, measurement and integration into local, national and global strategies.

The *Call to Action* further emphasises volunteering should be accessible and inclusive, and governments, VIOs, civil society, philanthropy and the private sector all have a role to play in creating conditions that enable it to thrive. It similarly highlights how volunteering depends on broader systems and infrastructures. Drawing on consultations with nearly 14,000 volunteers and parties across 164 countries, the paper identifies four priority areas for the future of volunteering:

- 1 Championing the value of volunteering
- 2 Building enabling environments
- 3 Ensuring significant and sustained investment
- 4 Safeguarding volunteers and volunteering spaces.

The paper argues volunteering initiatives require coherent infrastructure, supportive policies, implementation capacity and long-term investment if they are to realise their full

potential and contribute effectively to sustainable development.⁷⁴

At the organisational level, initiatives such as Forum's *Global Volunteering Standard*⁷⁵ aim to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of volunteer involvement by promoting good practice in areas like safeguarding, duty of care, inclusion, responsible volunteer engagement and organisational accountability. These efforts reflect growing recognition that meaningful and effective volunteering depends not only on the commitment of the volunteers themselves, but also on the policies, institutions, resources and organisational practices that support them.

Volunteering should not be framed as a no- or low-cost alternative to development investment, nor as a supplementary input that can compensate for resource shortages elsewhere. It is a form of social infrastructure, whose effectiveness depends on the strength of the systems that enable and support it over the long term.⁷⁶

Other challenges

The fact that volunteering is based on relationships further strengthens its relevance. Sustained people-to-people participation builds trust and credibility,⁷⁷ yet this introduces another layer of complexity. While volunteering can strengthen local systems, it may also serve external strategic interests, such as diplomacy.

This reinforces a central challenge: how to ensure volunteering remains locally grounded and responsive to community-defined priorities, rather than shaped primarily by external agendas. Shrinking civic space and reduced funding in many contexts pose a significant challenge to development effectiveness, limiting the ability of civil society actors, including volunteers, to participate meaningfully in development processes.⁷⁸ This reinforces the importance of protecting and strengthening civic space, while recognising volunteering cannot be fully effective in environments where participation and expression are constrained.⁷⁹



PHOTO CREDIT : Cuso International

How is volunteering changing?

The expanding definitions and understandings of volunteering as concept and practice, as well as funding and other resource-based challenges, are shaping how volunteering itself is changing. The previously dominant models of volunteering that have originated from the Global North and emphasise unpaid, formal and organisation-based participation⁸⁰ are increasingly viewed as incomplete. They do not reflect the realities in other contexts, especially in the Global South, where volunteering is often embedded within community systems, social obligations and livelihood strategies.

Positioning volunteering as part of development infrastructure therefore requires a more nuanced approach, one that accounts for these differences while strengthening institutions, improving service delivery and supporting more equitable arrangements.⁸¹ This becomes even more relevant when volunteering is framed as part of soft diplomacy. While such positioning can elevate visibility and investment, it also raises questions about whose priorities shape volunteering agendas, and how to balance strategic interests with locally defined needs. A central question therefore emerges: How do we move from recognising the value of volunteering to designing systems and policies that make full and equitable use of its ability to contribute to change? This is particularly important within a context of declining funding and shifting global priorities.⁸²

Strengthening enabling environments is critical for sustaining and growing volunteering. This is reinforced by evidence showing that volunteering is shaped by both structural factors, such as economic conditions, governance systems and institutional frameworks, and cultural factors like values, norms and levels of social trust.⁸³ Volunteering does not operate in isolation but depends on supportive ecosystems that enable and sustain participation over time.⁸⁴

Evidence suggests structured programmes can support participation, but sustained engagement depends on meaningful, voluntary experiences.⁸⁵ Participation in volunteering is shaped by broader enabling conditions, including access, awareness and socio-economic factors. This highlights the need for deliberate efforts to ensure inclusive and equitable opportunities.⁸⁶ International experiences, including international volunteering, can play an important role in developing globally connected, engaged and informed citizens.⁸⁷ At the same time, experiences of volunteering within one's own community can strengthen local engagement, participation and civic involvement.

Ensuring volunteering initiatives are strategically integrated into broader planning frameworks may enhance both their development impact and contribution to sustainability, community and cultural identity.⁸⁸ Volunteering is increasingly positioned as part of a broader ecosystem of global cooperation that includes education, culture and civil society partnerships.⁸⁹ However, this must be balanced with a commitment to locally identified priorities and locally led approaches. While international partnerships can create opportunities for learning, exchange and collaboration, concerns remain about the extent to which external actors shape volunteering agendas and priorities. These dynamics reflect ongoing debates within development cooperation about how to balance global objectives with equitable partnership models. Effective partnerships therefore require addressing power imbalances and ensuring local actors have meaningful influence over decision-making processes.⁹⁰

Adequate preparation and support for volunteers is also critical, as challenges related to cultural adaptation and project implementation highlight the need for stronger institutional frameworks and mechanisms⁹¹ that make sure volunteers are able to support the organisations and communities in which they work. Strengthening organisational capacity, including training and

support for volunteer coordinators, is critical to ensuring volunteering initiatives can effectively engage and support vulnerable and marginalised groups.⁹² This suggests maximising the benefits of volunteering is not simply a matter of recruiting more volunteers. It also requires shaping volunteer experiences so they are accessible, flexible, inclusive and meaningfully supported over time.⁹³

There is broad consensus that stronger institutional support, including national strategies and policy frameworks, is needed to enhance volunteering's role in promoting inclusion and participation.⁹⁴ Volunteering can be incorporated into broader strategic planning, where it can contribute to both economic and social objectives.⁹⁵ Increasing awareness and understanding of international volunteering at the national level is also essential, as limited public knowledge can constrain participation and reduce the perceived legitimacy of volunteering within broader development systems.⁹⁶

Institutions also play an important role in shaping what happens after volunteering ends. Where organisations fail to offer meaningful post-placement opportunities, motivated volunteers

may struggle to translate their experience into sustained social action, weakening one of the longer-term civic benefits often associated with international volunteering.⁹⁷

Forum's recent work on alumni engagement suggests approaches are evolving. Rather than focusing primarily on recruitment, fundraising and volunteer selection, there is increasing emphasis on supporting returned volunteers through career guidance, continued learning opportunities and assistance in translating their experience into meaningful action within their own communities.⁹⁸

Evidence also suggests while volunteering can and does occur in all kinds of environments, strong civic environments characterised by trust, social capital and opportunities for involvement can help support it⁹⁹ and sustain participation over time. This aligns closely with relational perspectives, which emphasise open, participatory and trust-based environments can strengthen both volunteering and the relationships that emerge through it. It is worth noting, however, that volunteering may also emerge in response to the absence of these conditions, particularly during periods of crisis, conflict or social disruption.



PHOTO CREDIT • France Volontaires

How can volunteering be more equitable and/or promote equality?

The many definitions of volunteering discussed at the beginning of this paper show volunteering is flexible; it can adapt and change to reflect and more effectively function in different contexts and cultures. Given colonial histories and legacies of paternalistic development,¹⁰⁰ it is important to discuss power dynamics and how to work toward more equitable programming, especially in terms of volunteering as international cooperation.

This paper has already called for further recognition and measurement of volunteering identified as informal or non-programmed. Looking ahead, there is a need to rethink how volunteering is measured, recognised and positioned within development frameworks. Future approaches should better capture these types of volunteering, particularly the locally led and often less visible forms that sustain communities but remain under-recognised in formal measurement systems. This can help to destabilise the valuing of one type of volunteering over another.

Programme governance can also be structured so all voices are heard, and international actors, local partners and local governments all play a role. There was mention of adaptive local ownership models rather than rigid, external control.¹⁰¹ Multiple interviewees mentioned distributing ownership over programmed

volunteering as a means toward disrupting traditional power dynamics in which not all people have a voice in the workings of volunteer projects. These governance systems must be adaptive, inclusive and responsive to complex challenges, highlighting the importance of aligning volunteering within broader institutional reforms and policy frameworks.¹⁰² An example is UNV working with the International Labour Organization to revise national statistical modules so they could better capture informal volunteering.¹⁰³

During the interviews, participants suggested additional South-South or South-North exchange to encourage knowledge production in the Global South. One example is France Volontaires' reciprocal mobility programme between France and Côte d'Ivoire, which illustrates how international volunteering can move beyond traditional North-South models by promoting reciprocal exchanges, shared learning and more balanced partnerships between institutions and volunteers in both countries¹⁰⁴. Examples of VSO's blended¹⁰⁵ approaches, including projects such as Improving Children's Learning and Participation in Tanzania, Driving Youth-Led Agrobusiness and Micro Enterprises in Uganda and Sisters for Sisters' Education in Nepal offer other concrete examples of encouraging more equitable partnerships.

Where are we going after 2030?

This paper has attempted to engage with the following questions and topics:

definitions
of volunteering

issues contributing to constraints
and support for volunteering

impact
of volunteering

changes in volunteering
that are being seen

evidence for this impact
(especially with regard to the SDGs)

ways volunteering
can contribute to equality

How, then, can we look toward the future of volunteering, beyond 2030? Though this paper was developed through conversations and engagement with a wide range of perspectives and ideas, we can draw some specific recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Recognise all forms of volunteering

Volunteering takes many forms and will continue to evolve in response to social, economic, technological and demographic changes. Across contexts, people contribute through formal and informal volunteering, community-led initiatives, mutual aid, civic participation, organisational volunteering and increasingly through hybrid and digital models. These different forms often serve distinct purposes, engage different groups of people and contribute to communities in different ways. Recognising this diversity is essential to understanding volunteering's full contribution to sustainable development and to the SDGs.

Particular attention should be given to often-overlooked forms of volunteering in policy, measurement and funding frameworks, including informal, non-programmed and community-based volunteering. While these activities may fall outside formal institutional definitions, they frequently play critical roles in social cohesion, resilience, care, crisis response and collective action.

Additionally, volunteering is adapting to changing technologies and patterns of participation. Digital

and hybrid models offer new ways to engage volunteers through remote and flexible formats, including online mentoring, service delivery and administrative support,¹⁰⁶ as well as knowledge sharing and collaboration across geographic boundaries. These evolving models reflect broader shifts in how volunteering is structured and accessed, highlighting the importance of adapting systems to changing technologies and participation patterns.¹⁰⁷

However, the benefits of evolving forms of volunteering will not be realised equally unless barriers to participation are addressed. This includes access, confidence¹⁰⁸ and digital literacy, but also broader constraints such as time, income, mobility, disability, age, gender norms and unequal access to opportunities. Efforts to strengthen volunteering should therefore focus on creating enabling environments that support inclusive participation across all forms of volunteering, while recognising different approaches are needed in different contexts.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Reconsider evidence

It is important to move beyond a narrow focus on whether volunteering “works” and toward questions about which forms of volunteering, under what conditions, for whom and through which mechanisms produce different kinds of outcomes. Interviews suggest answering these questions and measuring impact require approaches that allow for the complexities of relationships to be revealed. Volunteering is a relational process, and measurement needs to reflect these relationships. There is also a need to better integrate qualitative and relational outcomes, while balancing consistency in measurement with the flexibility required to reflect contextual variations.

Some development professionals interviewed noted volunteering could benefit from greater visibility within the SDGs, including volunteer-specific indicators, or comparable measures in whatever succeeds the 2030 Agenda. Others, particularly researchers, were more cautious, noting standalone indicators risk oversimplifying a highly complex and context-dependent field. Overly rigid measurement frameworks may flatten volunteering into narrow metrics that fail to capture its broader social, relational and systemic contributions.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, strengthening national and global data systems is important, particularly in improving the comparability of data across contexts while preserving nuances, with the caveat that good data requires resources that may not be available in certain contexts.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Strengthen governance and enabling environments for volunteering

Measurement alone will not be sufficient. There is a broad recognition that governments, VIOs, communities and international networks all have a role to play in creating environments where volunteering can flourish. This includes supportive public policies, legal and regulatory frameworks, organisational systems and opportunities for participation that recognise and enable volunteering in its many forms.

Looking beyond 2030, volunteering should not be treated as a standalone activity, but as part of the broader social infrastructure that supports participation, community resilience and collective action. This does not necessarily require integration into formal development frameworks, particularly at a time when development systems themselves are evolving and, in some contexts, being reduced or restructured due to funding pressures and shifting priorities. Rather, the focus should be on ensuring volunteering is recognised

and supported within the systems and institutions that are most relevant to local contexts.¹¹⁰

There is growing acknowledgement effective volunteering depends on enabling environments that are grounded in local priorities while also benefiting from broader collaboration and exchange. This includes strengthening national strategies where appropriate, supporting community-led approaches, investing in organisational capacity and creating opportunities for knowledge sharing across sectors and countries.

The *Call to Action on the Future of Volunteering* highlights the importance of enabling environments, cross-sector collaboration and investment in volunteering infrastructure, while emphasising volunteering should be inclusive, accessible, and responsive to local realities.¹¹¹ At the organisational level, initiatives such as the *Global Volunteering Standard* demonstrate the

importance of strong governance, safeguarding, accountability and volunteer support systems. Together, these efforts suggest the future of volunteering depends not only on recruiting

volunteers, but also on strengthening the policies, institutions and relationships that enable meaningful participation and long-term engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Invest in volunteering infrastructure

As discussed, volunteering systems face increasing financial pressures. While volunteers bring significant value, effective volunteering is not without cost. Organisations require adequate resources to recruit, train, support, manage and sustain volunteers and related programmes. Additionally, participation in volunteering is not evenly distributed, with socio-economic factors such as education, employment, location and access influencing who is able to engage.¹¹²

External funding and short-term incentive structures can have unintended consequences, including disrupting existing community-based volunteering systems or creating dependencies that are difficult to sustain once funding ends.¹¹³ Researchers have noted funding can, in some contexts, reshape existing patterns of participation and community action. In particular, there is a need to account for (and be cautious of the reality of) how donor funding and remuneration practices may privilege certain forms of volunteering, disrupt historically rooted volunteer practices or redirect community action toward externally defined priorities if not carefully designed.¹¹⁴ From a relational perspective, sustained investment in people-to-people engagement is also important,

as short-term or fragmented funding approaches may limit volunteering's long-term relationship-building potential.

These challenges reflect broader financing constraints within the development sector. There is increasing pressure on development finance, with competing global priorities and limited resources requiring more strategic and efficient use of funding. This reinforces the need to ensure volunteering is supported through sustainable financing models rather than treated primarily as a cost-saving substitute. However, the growing resource constraints may create opportunities for greater recognition of volunteering's contribution to development, community resilience and civic participation. Sustainable support for volunteering may come from a combination of public investment, philanthropy, private sector engagement, community contributions and stronger recognition of volunteering's value. Increasing awareness of its contributions may not only help mobilise resources, but also strengthen public recognition, participation and long-term commitment to volunteering across communities and institutions.



PHOTO CREDIT • France Volontaires

RECOMMENDATION 5

Make volunteering equitable and accessible

Future approaches must move beyond participation and focus on the quality, inclusivity and long-term value of volunteering, while ensuring opportunities are accessible across diverse socio-economic contexts. Where opportunities and resources allow, strengthening pathways from domestic to international volunteering may help broaden participation and support continued engagement. However, access to international volunteering remains uneven, particularly in many lower-resource contexts. This highlights the importance of strengthening local and national volunteering opportunities and asking if it is possible to increase international exchange from a South-North perspective.

Increasingly, there is an observed need to better recognise and value diverse models and understandings of volunteering, including those grounded in reciprocity, collective responsibility and horizontal solidarity. These approaches exist across many regions and contexts and help challenge assumptions that volunteering follows a single model or pathway.¹¹⁵ This aligns with broader calls to rethink the development sector's architecture beyond 2030, toward more inclusive, networked and locally driven systems that better reflect the complexity of global challenges.¹¹⁶

Recognising volunteering's contribution extends beyond thinking about how volunteers assist with various services. It can shape relationships, strengthen civic participation and contribute to broader social well-being, reinforcing its relevance not only within development systems but also within broader social policy and governance frameworks.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Strengthen locally led and equitable partnerships

Volunteering is most effective when it is grounded in local priorities and shaped by those most directly affected by development challenges. Future approaches should strengthen locally led and shared decision-making models, ensuring communities, local organisations, volunteers and other parties hold meaningful influence over how volunteering initiatives are designed, implemented and evaluated.

As volunteering evolves beyond 2030, there is growing recognition partnerships should move beyond one-way models of assistance toward approaches based on reciprocity, mutual learning and shared responsibility. This includes recognising diverse forms of knowledge, supporting South-South and other forms of exchange, recognising and documenting community and local forms of volunteering, addressing power imbalances within volunteering systems and ensuring international engagement complements rather than directs locally identified priorities.

Appendix

Acronyms

AVI	Australian Volunteers Program
CBO	Community-based organisation
IVCO	International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ODA	Official development assistance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNV	United Nations Volunteers Programme
VIO	Volunteer Involving Organisation

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