



International Forum for
Volunteering in Development

Understanding Inequalities in Volunteering Research and Evidence

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Images from top left: 1. VSA volunteer Rolf Huber (right) works with local wood carver, Alipate, in 'Eua, Tonga. 2. Singapore volunteer Fauzie Laily with a Cambodian family in Siem Reap (photo credit: Singapore Intl. Foundation) 3. Volunteer Adérito Dzimba and teacher Pascoa Luis discuss digital literacy in the classroom 4. Fiona Kirby engages with Rohingya children at a Home Based Child Friendly Center in Jamtoli, Ukhiya (Bangladesh) 5. Volunteer Takashi Nakayama teaches computer basics and internet access in Malaysia for JICA, photo by Kaku Suzuki. 6. Australian volunteer Elizabeth Spooner tackles environment and climate change in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) 7. International volunteer Jonah Tendere works with VSO to mobilise community volunteers and Saidu Turay advocates for sanitation improvements in Kroo Bay slum 8. Ron Schimpf (left) volunteers with 'So They Can' to support local communities. 9. Eiko Kusuyama interviews at a health meeting in Bangladesh for JICA, photo by Kaku Suzuki.

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Introduction

This paper is based on a study commissioned by the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) with two objectives: first, to deepen its members' collective understanding of inequalities in volunteering research, their root causes and how they are manifested; and second, to use this improved understanding to propose concrete ways in which a range of actors in the volunteering research space can address these inequalities.

In addressing these objectives, we formulated the following research questions:

1. Why is there inequality in volunteering research?
2. How does inequality in volunteering research manifest?
3. Based on the findings from the two questions, what concrete proposals can be made in which a range of actors in the volunteering research space can address inequality in volunteering research?

The qualitative research methodology comprised the following: (1) a literature review in which the researchers consulted relevant academic and practitioner-produced literature; (2) a review of relevant components of the raw data used in Nick Ockenden's study for Forum (2022) *A New Dawn: Strategic Pathways for the Future of Volunteering in Development*; and (3) seven key informant interviews with participants across the spectrum of volunteering research and practice—one International Volunteer Cooperation Organisation (IVCO) in France; three academics – two in Argentina and one in Japan; respectively; two academics in Argentina; and three volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) in Zimbabwe (see Appendix).

The research findings are presented in three sections: (1) Why is there inequality in volunteering research and how does it manifest? (2) Implications of the imbalances; and (3) How do we change inequalities in volunteering research?

Glossary

CSO (Civil Society Organisation): A CSO refers to a non-governmental and non-profit organisation that operates independently from the government or for-profit sector. CSOs are usually focused on addressing social, cultural, environmental, or humanitarian issues, and they play a crucial role in advocating for various causes, promoting civic engagement, and contributing to the overall well-being of society.

IVCO (International Volunteer Cooperation Organisation): An IVCO is an entity or group that facilitates the coordination, communication, and management of volunteers on an international scale, often working in various countries or regions to support charitable, humanitarian, or community-oriented initiatives. These organisations work to connect volunteers from different countries and regions to participate in various projects, programs, and initiatives that aim to address global challenges, promote cross-cultural understanding, and contribute to international development and humanitarian efforts.

VIO (Volunteer-Involving Organisation): A VIO is an organisation that actively engages and involves volunteers in its activities, projects, or initiatives. VIOs rely on the contribution of volunteers to fulfill their missions and achieve their goals, often in fields such as community development, education, healthcare, and environmental conservation.

1. Why is there inequality in volunteering research and how does it manifest?

Any discussion about inequality in volunteering research must be located within the context of geopolitical imbalances in knowledge production. Two features of this context are relevant to our study. First, Collyer et al. (2019, p.11) describe the power imbalance as one in which the Global South is seen as being on the margins (periphery) of knowledge production, with the Global North being at its centre (the metropole). This imbalance means countries in the South have limited opportunities to influence global research agendas 'and their research workers often struggle for international recognition' (ibid, p. xviii). Second, dominant discourses in the North become universalised, meaning certain ideas are applied everywhere, regardless of context (Menon, 2022, p.5).

These features were also articulated in the interview data gathered for this study: 'I think the inequalities, they were socially constructed during the colonisation process...So, it's an issue of structure and it has been reinforced by global organisations, which still acknowledge that Europe is the centre and the rest of the world is the periphery' (Mwaruta, interview, 27 March 2023).

Below, we examine five ways in which inequality manifests in volunteering research and evidence in relation to: hierarchies; assumptions and discourses; funding; research skills and capacity; and challenges in measuring the informal.

1.1 Hierarchies in volunteering research

Volunteering research is not a distinct field within the academic context, being located across various disciplines within the social sciences: 'I think it is very natural, that study on volunteering become interdisciplinary. Volunteering is not like a studying the law or economy or natural sciences or engineering. There is no single discipline for the topic. You can study volunteering from many perspectives...you can approach volunteering from a perspective of a sociologist or anthropologist'(Okabe, interview, 31 March 2023). However, much of the knowledge about volunteering practice and programmes does not emanate from universities, but has been spearheaded by organisations, institutions and funders based in the global North, mostly in relation to international volunteering.

The literature suggests the dominance of international volunteering research is partly a function of the relationship between international volunteering and international aid (Franco and Shahrok, 2015, pp.18-19). In the 1950s and 1960s, IVCOs¹ were formed with explicit development objectives,

1. Such as Melbourne University's Volunteer Graduate Scheme (forerunner of Australia Volunteers International) in 1951, VSO (1958) and Peace Corps (1961), among others (Franco and Shahrokh, 2015, pp. 18-19). Many others followed.

their volunteers focused on service delivery and technical assistance within a modernisation development paradigm. The formation of United Nations Volunteers in 1970 strengthened the international volunteering movement and saw the start of South-South and national volunteering schemes (ibid).

In this context, the discourse about international volunteering became dominant and relatively little research was conducted on other forms, such as informal grassroots volunteering, mutual solidarity activities and individual volunteer participation (Baillie Smith, Laurie & Griffiths, 2017). In the absence of a mapping exercise that quantifies studies and publications about volunteering across the world from the 1960s onwards, our experience and interview data suggest a hierarchy exists in the volunteering knowledge landscape in which certain aims, approaches and assumptions about volunteering are valued over others.

National and local volunteer-involving organisations (VIOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) may attempt to research their own practices or fill knowledge gaps about volunteering in their respective countries. But in Zimbabwe, participants revealed the struggle to validate and legitimate their work, and gain respect for local conceptions and knowledge about volunteering. Not only does the government reportedly view volunteering as a low priority, but there is also an association between the ability to secure resources on the one hand, and perceptions of the authenticity of their volunteering research on the other:

‘If you are able to attract funding to do this work ... [it] means it’s very authentic and it’s very real, just [be]cause you have the resources. But if you do this similar work without the resources, it is just undermined, because the work has been done with little resources or purely by volunteerism’ (VIONet Zimbabwe, interview, 28 March 2023).

These experiences reinforce the challenging context of research from within the South—for VIOs, as well as university research workers who struggle for recognition.

1.2 Assumptions and discourses about volunteering

‘Discourse’ is understood as a way of perceiving, framing and viewing the world (Escobar, 2011 [1995]). Discourse is not only about ‘definitions’ but also about how our understandings of volunteering impact the way we ‘do’ and in this case, ‘research’ volunteering. The problem is, dominant definitions and practices from northern cultures and geographies have historically been taken to define the ‘universal’, ‘legitimate’ or ‘valuable’ boundaries in research on volunteering (Mati & Perold, 2020). This exacerbates inequalities in evidence, because understandings and practices of volunteering from the North are used to study volunteering practices in the South despite contextual differences. The practice is most prevalent in ‘international’ comparative studies that attempt to measure volunteering (Guidi, et al., 2021). Since ‘evidence’ is defined as ‘something that furnishes proof’ or ‘the facts that make you believe that something is true’², it is clear such

2. Online Merriam-Webster and Oxford dictionaries, respectively.

practices compromise our understanding of the diverse forms of volunteering.

For example, when using research methods such as surveys and questionnaires, 'there are conceptual and methodological issues that are put to [the] test when social actors answer a survey on their perception of volunteerism and the activities they perform' (Roitter, 2017). Some actions in southern contexts do not always evoke the notion of volunteering as they do in northern countries (Thompson & Toro, 2000). Consequently, 'evidence' may rest on distorted interpretations of international comparisons.

In our interviews, several participants pointed to the need to understand that volunteering is embedded in local cultures and activities. In Mexico, for example, volunteering is understood more as 'collaboration' with others (Verduzco, 2017). In designing the survey questionnaire for the *Encuesta Nacional de Solidaridad y Acción Voluntaria - ENSAV* (National Survey on Solidarity and Voluntary Action) (Butcher, 2010), the word 'volunteer' was difficult to describe, and was not fully understood by the general population. Individuals did not consider themselves to be volunteers even if they did practice volunteer activities according to international and northern standards.

The researchers innovated by developing a list of 23 activities to capture all forms of solidarity or volunteer practices carried out by people at some time of their lives, whether through an institution or in an informal and/or individual manner (Verduzco, 2003, 2008). The ENSAV now constitutes a longitudinal series (2012, 2016 & 2021) that offers a useful model for similar surveys in other parts of the South³. This experience influenced the development of the International Labour Organisation's *Manual for the Measurement of Volunteer Work* launched in 2011, but this instrument still has a long way to go in understanding volunteer work around the globe.

Mexico's experience demonstrates local research has the advantage of understanding context, and can formulate appropriate definitions of volunteering while taking account of international definitions, such as those developed by international entities⁴. It highlights how conceptual debates are needed to develop locally relevant research tools, including measurement strategies, that can effectively capture what they are meant to analyse and estimate.

3. The questionnaires, databases and methodological notes are available in ROPER: Data Opinion Surveys, Cornell University for researchers and students to utilise, citing the source: Centro de Investigación y Estudios sobre Sociedad Civil, CIESC, Mexico. The longitudinal study has been presented and analysed in three books on Mexican generosity (Butcher, 2013, 2019 & 2022).

<https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/ipoll/search?collection=LSM&experimental=NON&q=ensav&tab=STUDY>

4. This includes definitions formulated by United Nations Volunteers and the International Labour Organisation.

1.3 Funding

The availability of financial resources for volunteering research is governed by geopolitical as well as national factors. For example, the World Bank's classification of low-, middle- and high-income countries affects the extent to which countries are considered eligible for financial support. In Argentina, for example, 'the economic status of Argentina makes these kinds of agencies not to have them on the radar ...[there are] basically no funds for research, be it on civil society, volunteering or volunteering for development...' (Roitter, interview, 29 March 2023).

In light of the lack of support from international funders as well as the Argentine government, academic researchers in that country turn to collegial collaboration to maximise the use of available resources:

'When there is a possibility of research in social sciences that has to do with community, civil society or the like, we as researchers help each other out and many times we add the questions we need to find answers for on funded research in the same discipline. This is one way to advance in our studies' (Garcia, interview, 30 March 2023).

By piggybacking on other studies, however, researchers are constrained in what they can investigate.

A further confounding factor is funders rarely invest in institution-building, preferring to use ready-made vehicles to deliver the research they seek (Cordua, 2023; Wessel, Kontinen, & Nyigmah, 2023; Moyo & Imafidon, 2021; Mati & Perold, 2020; Edwards, 2013). This weakens the infrastructure for volunteering research in countries in the South. Even where research institutions such as universities exist, the Zimbabwean experience indicates this is not enough to attract funding for research: '...not many funders would like to fund certain areas of research, so we have a gap there of funding to be able to conduct that [volunteering research], even though we have the institutions to do it' (Phiri, interview, 28 March 2023).

The data also cite cases where northern funding practices in the development sector exclude players in Africa, for example, impacting on control of resources for volunteering research:

'Under [a] consortium, we jointly apply for resources from the European Union...But as an African organisation, we don't have the right to apply, so we have to apply with another European organisation and we will become a partner to do some of the activities [that] are supposed to be done here in Africa. But the money doesn't come to us' (Mwaruta, interview, 27 March 2023).

These examples illustrate some of the entrenched factors that affect funding flows for volunteering research in different parts of the South.

1.4 Research skills and capacity

In our experience as Global South researchers, capacity for volunteering research is widely available in the Global North by virtue of the structural relationships between IVCOs, governments, donors and universities, as well as other players supporting development aid programmes. In southern countries, these networks and institutions are unevenly distributed. In Africa, for example, there are only two university centres focused on philanthropy⁵ while in Latin America there are several⁶.

Because much volunteering research takes place in the context of aid, international assistance or philanthropy by Global North actors, our evidence shows it is often carried out with token participation, by invitation, of a few actors in the South. Of late, some IVCOs are being deliberate about being more inclusive: 'One of the things that we considered during the choice [of a research service provider] was that they had a consultant in Madagascar who is quite well-known and respected and with the knowledge of civil society in the country' (France Volontaires interview, 27 March 2023). France Volontaires also invited a Global South partner (Agence Nationale du Volontariat du Togo ([ANVT]) to be part of a steering group as part of its current study on reciprocity, and to help conceptualise the design of the study.

Zimbabwe's volunteering sector receives virtually no support to develop its research expertise. To remedy that challenge, the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO) recently introduced a knowledge exchange component into their operations, with a view to document volunteering and other work by their civil society members, and to build local skills to do so (Phiri, interview, 28 March 2023).

These examples highlight the human resource factors that enable northern VIOs to undertake the research that meet their needs and interests, and the factors that constrain the ability of VIOs in the South to do the same. They give rise to a situation in which the paucity of volunteering research in the South is partly a function of the small number of researchers available and equipped to work on topics in the field of volunteering for development.

5. The Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment in Johannesburg, South Africa, and the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement and Responsible Business at the American University in Cairo, Egypt.

6. In Latin America, there are various private institutions, such as CEMEFI Mexican Center for Philanthropy. Since 2010, the Center for Civil Society Research and Studies, CIESC, affiliated with the Tecnológico de Monterrey, studies both philanthropy and volunteering. Public centres such as the National University (UNAM), the Center for Superior Anthropological Studies, CIESAS and El Colegio de México, COLMEX, also include aspects of volunteering in their research as well as institutions such as the Universidad del Pacífico in Peru and CEFIS, a centre for the study of philanthropy and social investment at the Alberto Ibáñez University in Chile.

1.5 Challenges in measuring the informal

One of the reasons for a gap in understanding more informal acts of volunteer action is the challenge of documenting local expressions of volunteering. In addition to the example of the Mexico national surveys mentioned earlier, professor Mario Roitter points to the challenge of delineating (and to a certain extent, quantifying) volunteering as separate activity—especially in contexts where it is considered by many as part of wider people-to-people helping activities in communities⁷: ‘You have Time Use National Surveys⁸, and in many countries these official surveys occur...in Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Chile and Uruguay, for example. Mostly volunteering has been considered...as work outside the home’ (Roitter, interview, 29 March 2023).

This challenge is likely to increase in the future, as Garcia explains: ‘By 2030, I think we are going to observe and practice more of this “un-articulated” or “informal” volunteer activity occurring outside of registered or formal groups around the world. It will be more spontaneous and, sometimes in the new term, more “episodic”’ (interview, 30 March 2023).

7. In Zimbabwe, for instance, volunteering had a strong role to play in the liberation struggle, but it was not called or considered as volunteering. (Phiri, interview, 28 March 2023)

8. These surveys are produced by official government statistics agencies.

2. How the narrowing of research impacts our understanding and decision-making

The analysis above holds numerous implications for Forum members and donors, two of which are discussed below.

2.1 What research is produced and what is its value?

It is a truism that organisations want to conduct research concerning the type of volunteering they carry out—both in the North and South. In the wake of COVID-19, however, the thinking about international voluntary cooperation in development is undergoing a sea-change and in future, more IVCO volunteering programmes may be organised as ‘blended’ or ‘hybrid’ modalities. In this context, it is important to note the following finding from a recent study: ‘There remains a significant gap in the existing literature around capturing and understanding the interactions between different types of volunteers working together, whether by chance or design, and the ways in which these interactions may improve development outcomes’ (Baillie Smith, et al., 2022, p.26).

Bearing in mind how inequalities in volunteering research manifest, the finding holds at least two implications for volunteering research. First, ‘hybridity’ may feature many different combinations of volunteer modalities, and richer contextual information is needed to understand the complexity of how different forms of volunteering manifest at different times in varied contexts.

Second, one of the key conclusions from IVCO 2022 is that volunteering needs to be integrated more deliberately within different development sectors (Forum, 2023 p.44). Which volunteering approaches would best address specific development issues? How might hierarchies in hybridity models and power relationships between volunteers be addressed?

These are just some of the questions that could be informed by volunteering research. But which perspectives will drive the research? How inclusive will such studies be of the different stakeholders in volunteering practice? What will be the value of such evidence? And to whom?

Our interview data show there are multiple competing assumptions about what counts as valuable volunteering research or knowledge. For our interviewees, research is valuable not only if it can increase the knowledge base on volunteering for development, but also if it can improve practice and influence policy. In Zimbabwe, one participant said: ‘We would like to focus on impact measurement because...we don’t have [actual] tangible evidence [of the] impact in the community...so the knowledge gap is huge’ (Mwaruta, interview, 27 March 2023). And in JICA’s experience, ‘If researchers can show the impact of a volunteering project, it is very useful for practitioners too’ (Okabe, interview, 31 March 2023).

The interviews with France Volontaires and NANGO in Zimbabwe indicated a strong emphasis on the value of applied research: ‘Most of the research we do is targeting the sector: how to improve

our everyday practice, how to be better at volunteering. It's also directed at decision-makers, to show them what volunteering is about, what impact it can have' (Morillon, interview, 27 March 2023).

In the Zimbabwean context, it was felt that fieldwork is critical to producing authentic and practical findings that impact the community at the local level: 'There's a difference in just researching for the sake of ticking boxes and then researching for the sake of changing the situation. All research should be done so that it can be applied' (Phiri, interview, 28 March 2023).

In rethinking their programme strategies, IVCOs can undertake inclusive and equitable research that starts filling the gaps in knowledge about volunteering, with evidence from different viewpoints and locations.

2.2 How the narrowing of research impacts our understanding and decision-making

How do we know what we do not know about volunteering in development? How do we avoid blind spots in 'global' volunteering literature? As noted, understanding volunteering in different development contexts means examining the nuances and complexities of volunteering practices and conceptions from different perspectives.

For example, the JICA participant mentioned a knowledge gap as how local people in the host countries view the Japanese volunteers: 'There may be some inequalities in the viewpoints or perspectives...For example, in our research, we tend to rely on the returning volunteers, Japanese volunteers' perspective, [to] see how they understand and communicate with the local people... There the perspectives from local people are lacking...How do they look at Japanese volunteers? How do they work with volunteers?' (Okabe, interview, 31 March 2023). A critical factor will be to avoid methodologies that are, by their very design, exclusionary:

For many years, projects containing pre-established formats appeared on the international panorama that did not listen to community needs [and] where important and necessary modifications to the project were not possible. And I think we should approach research...in a systemic way...where results...can be geared and re-adjusted to actually...understand the problem at hand. It is important that we understand how volunteering for development can be better. (Garcia, interview, 30 March 2023)

Garcia's view is shared by multiple participants from the South. In Zimbabwe, for example, participants indicated surveys do not accurately capture the nuances of the volunteering phenomenon in their local contexts.

Addressing inequalities in volunteering will not only require more research in the South, but will also need research shaped by Global South experiences and frameworks of volunteering. This will strengthen the evidence base used to inform strategic decision-making among stakeholders in the volunteering space.

3. How do we change inequalities in volunteering research?

Below, we offer four recommendations as to how stakeholders can start countering the inequalities demonstrated in volunteering research.

3.1 Challenges in measuring the informal

Changing the skewed nature of volunteering research and evidence starts by recognising the value of volunteers and volunteering in multiple geographies and their relevance to international, regional and national development. In building a truly global volunteering evidence base, those with resources need to be deliberate about including discourses and practices that are traditionally excluded or overlooked in volunteering research.

This can only happen through trust-based relationships that genuinely seek to gain new insights about volunteering. In this context, ‘trust-based’ and ‘genuine’ refers to relationships that value, respect, and support the concerns and perspectives of all players. According to one Zimbabwean participant:

‘...respect is always missing. Respect...that the person you’re working with is a counterpart and that you, you are not necessarily superior to them...but if you come and we partner together as equal, it means we’re going to work together, and we are going to [work together] on the outcome’ (Phiri, interview, 28 March 2023).

Another Zimbabwean participant commented, ‘If you approach these inequalities by acknowledging that they’re there, and we are motivated and work to change, then I think it will go a long way in helping all of us’ (Mwaruta, interview, 27 March 2023).

Trust-based respectful relationships have the potential to redress the inward-looking or tokenistic involvement of select organisations and individuals currently prevalent in the volunteering research space. By ‘inward,’ we refer to practices where, for example, consultations are done internally, and contributors who are invited into the research partnership are usually drawn from a predefined circle of actors that appears open but is not. Such practices exacerbate existing inequalities.

There is evidence that some actors in the North and within the aid industry are already recognising this, and are making efforts to change their practice. France Volontaires believes that ‘both the hosting and sending organisation [must be] involved early on in the process; not just the ones from the North. Okay, we want to fight inequalities’ (Morillon, interview, 27 March 2023).

France Volontaires also stressed the need for diversity from the very design of research projects, and not when it’s time to go to the field: ‘When we draft the research programme itself, we do it with partners from the South, and they don’t arrive at the next step when we do the research

on the ground, but that they are involved from the beginning for the drafting of the terms of reference. I would say, we would also want to hire more consultants from the South...because it does give a different perspective' (Morillon, interview, 27 March 2023).

These are commendable developments that need to be scaled up if such initiatives are to bear fruit in redressing existing inequalities.

3.2 Adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to design and implement volunteering research

The findings of this study indicate equity in volunteering and volunteering research is an elusive goal. How, then, do we build effective partnerships in volunteering research?

Evidence from the data suggests that the various actors in multiple geographies involved in volunteering for development, share common aspirations while nonetheless having different interests and stakes in both its process and outcomes.

The research team proposes that actors, especially those who traditionally control the volunteering research space, should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach where all relevant stakeholders are brought on board and their actions interlinked to achieve common goals in the volunteering research process. In making the case for a multi-stakeholder perspective, Brouwer, et al. (2016, p.5) advocate for 'new approaches—for innovation—in how we govern ourselves, in how we use and share resources, and in how we create harmony between people of differing wealth and culture(s).'

This approach allows for the analysis of power dynamics in the collaboration and how to deal with power differences. It encourages the development of a common goal among diverse stakeholders and a governance structure to help organise collaboration and decision-making, using facilitators to mediate differences. The approach provides the means to establish ways of dealing with conflicts among stakeholders, to identify the strengths and deficiencies of different stakeholders, and to resolve the question: What should be done if essential stakeholders lack the capacity to lead and deliver? Other components include identifying tools for delivery and working through issues of efficiency.

The approach requires deliberate and intentional actions towards inclusion of stakeholders—all those who can affect, or are affected by, decisions about an issue that concerns them, in and from multiple contexts. Such stakeholders are within the state, private sector, civil society, academia, international agencies and the communities that are the site of volunteering in development. In this regard, Garcia (interview, 30 March 2023) suggests one practical way of ending inequality in research on volunteering:

Listen and look into both [informal and formal] volunteering [and] give a 'voice' to community needs...establish frank and constructive dialogue that confronts reality...and volunteers too must 'decolonise' some practices [by] not imposing pre-conceived ideas on what is good for

someone else. Dialogue has to get to the point of decision-making amongst all on what is not only good, but necessary to resolve for that community. We must listen to what has to be done to actually help and not impose our own ideas.

Mwaruta (interview, 28 March 2023) agrees: ‘Decolonisation is not one-sided. I think even here in Africa, there is a great need to decolonise organisations. Because in most cases when I talk to camp coordinators in Africa, they always want to measure themselves according to the standards of Europe. So, I think there is need of [a change of] mindset.’

3.3 Use a plurality of research methods

Methods in volunteering research—how we know what we know—are vital: first, they determine from which (and whose) perspectives volunteering for development is understood, and second, they help define the kind of knowledge generated and used.

In studying the volunteering sector, it is important to draw on ‘a vast constellation of research strategies and techniques that warrants careful examination’ (Kim and Raggo, 2022, p.100) to achieve a more in-depth understanding of what volunteering looks like in different contexts. Interviewees highlighted the need to look beyond numbers and into stories, activities and the ‘hows’ of volunteering, which can be captured by using a wider array of qualitative approaches to research:

‘Today, it is not a question of a lack of research methodologies—ethnography, observant participation, etc. Those are methodologies we handle well and already use in our research. The problem lies sometimes in [the] need for a closer look into traditional [e.g., quantitative] methodologies and their appropriate utilisation’ (Garcia, interview, 30 March 2023).

In other words, qualitative research methods do not begin by using a ‘measuring tool’ (e.g., a survey instrument) to assess volunteering, but by asking ‘What is going on?’ This requires taking a step back and freeing oneself (as much as possible) of prior assumptions about what volunteering is and how it functions. Rather than imposing definitions of what counts as volunteering, ethnographic approaches such as participant observation and informal discussions compel researchers to refocus on ‘local experiences, ideologies and practices of actors involved in volunteering and how these are shaped by economic, political and social forces’ (Chadwick, Fadel, & Millora, 2021).

These methods are rigorous and produce valid evidence, but they are also messy, fluid and ever-changing (c.f. Fitzgerald, et. al., 2021). Nevertheless, they generate important insights and expand understandings of the relationship between volunteering and development. It is important to highlight that participatory and ethnographic research methods require IVCOs, researchers and institutions to give up a certain degree of power in the research process. For example, they need to be ready to let community members or local stakeholders decide on the research questions, the kinds of methods to be used or how the findings will be disseminated (and to whom). All these decisions may, at times, be different from what IVCOs originally intended in the research.

3.4 Invest in building an equitable volunteering research ecosystem

Building an equitable volunteering research ecosystem calls for a coordinated approach to create spaces in the Global South and North that foster more research from the South, share research, network and undertake joint research projects. Governments, development partners, the donor community and the communities themselves need to be actively involved, as do media (VIONet Zimbabwe, interview, 28 March 2023). Trust-based partnerships are critical to unlocking the human and financial resources required to gain new insight into the value of mutual volunteer participation in development.

Partnerships with southern governments, universities and VIOs have the potential to produce research findings that aid in creating volunteering policy frameworks and in assessing the effectiveness of volunteer modalities in different development contexts. The multi-stakeholder approach outlined above would assist in setting research priorities and formulating research questions in ways that manage inequalities, such as those identified earlier.

The need for developing the Global South's research capacity (interviews Roitter, 29 March 2023; Morillon, 27 March 2023) is evident, since a functioning research ecosystem requires competent 'human capital' (Pandey & Pattnaik, 2015). IVCOs can meet this need by working with universities and other institutions to train country officers and partner organisations in research, as well as national and South-South volunteers. It would be key to build links between local universities to enhance capacity for volunteering research in different disciplines, and encourage them to involve their students in studying aspects of volunteering in development, noting the comment from the JICA Research Institute participant: 'There is no single discipline for the topic' (Okabe, interview, 31 March 2023).

Forum is encouraged to commission a mapping study to identify entities in the South that conduct research on volunteering and other aspects of giving. IVCOs and other players in the volunteering landscape are encouraged to commission southern researchers to conduct studies, using the multi-stakeholder approach to inculcate Global South perspectives and frameworks in all stages of the research process. This will help to increase the flow of funds to southern research entities, diversify the volunteering research base and enable Forum members to scale up efforts to be more inclusive in conducting volunteering research.

4. Conclusion

Using a qualitative research methodology that comprised a literature review and interviews with select practitioners and researchers, this study aimed to deepen the understanding of inequalities in volunteering research and propose concrete ways to address them. The findings indicate inequality in volunteering research is a product of multiple factors, manifesting in five key ways:

1. **Hierarchies** symptomatic of the wider sphere of global knowledge production manifest in volunteering research. The focus of volunteering research is heavily skewed in favour of northern actors owing to historical, political economy, geopolitical and managerial imperatives. The hierarchies lead to the relative neglect of the interests and practices of southern volunteering actors, and limit opportunities for them to contribute to the global knowledge base. Even where local southern volunteering actors produce their own research, the same hierarchies tend to denigrate this as wanting and inferior.
2. **Assumptions and discourses** about volunteering: While volunteering practice is embedded in local cultures and activities, dominant discourses and assumptions in volunteering research are not. Instead, experiences and practices from northern geographies tend to be generalised as universal, which produces distorted interpretations in international comparative studies. This narrows our understanding of the complexities of volunteering practices and perspectives on volunteering in different geographies, and compromises the evidence base.
3. **Low investments** in research, development and innovation in southern countries **result in the low prominence of volunteering research**. In addition, donors have not invested sufficiently in institution-building, preferring to use ready-made vehicles to deliver the research they seek. This weakens the institutional base for growing volunteering research in southern countries and undermines its sustainability.
4. **The capacity for volunteering research** is concentrated in the North by virtue of the structural relationships between IVCOs, governments, foundations and universities, as well as other players supporting aid programmes.
5. COVID-19 spotlighted the need to include **informal volunteer action/expressions of volunteering** in volunteer programmes, and these may feature in 'blended' or 'hybrid' modalities. Volunteering research must assist in understanding the engagement between different types of volunteers working together and the outcomes that flow from these interactions.

These imbalances hold numerous implications for international volunteering practice, particularly as IVCOs look to implement new modalities (some 'hybrid' or 'blended') and seek to integrate volunteering more closely within specific development sectors. Decision-makers face significant gaps in volunteering research as to how to action these approaches, and generating strategic questions that require more research to be done in the South, particularly research shaped by Global South volunteering experiences and frameworks.

How, then, do we change inequalities in volunteering research?

- 1. Recognise the value of volunteers and volunteering in multiple geographies** and their relevance to international, regional and national volunteering in development. In building a truly global volunteering evidence base, those with resources need to be deliberate about including discourses and practices that are traditionally excluded or overlooked in volunteering research. This can only happen through trust-based relationships that genuinely seek to gain new insights about volunteering.
- 2. Adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to design and implement volunteering research.** This will ensure all relevant stakeholders are brought on board, and their actions interlinked, to achieve common goals in the volunteering research process. The approach also facilitates the analysis of power dynamics in the collaboration and how to deal with power differences.
- 3. Use a plurality of research methods** to determine from which (and whose) perspectives volunteering in development is understood, as well as to shape and define the kind of knowledge generated and applied.
- 4. Invest in building an equitable volunteering research ecosystem** through a coordinated approach that creates spaces in both the Global South and Global North to foster more research from the South, share research, network and undertake joint research projects.

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Appendix 1

Key informant interviews conducted for study on inequalities in volunteering research and evidence, March 2023

Key informant	Interviewee	Date	Interviewer
International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations			
Lucie Morillon	France Volontaires	27 March 2023	Jacob Mati
Prof. Okabe, Yasunobu, JICA Research Fellow	JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development (JICA Research Institute)	31 March 2023	Chris Millora
Latin America			
Prof. Mario Roitter	Professor, Universidad de San Andres, Argentina	29 March 2023	Jacqueline Butcher
Prof. Oscar Garcia	Professor, San Martin National University, Argentina	30 March 2023	Jacqueline Butcher
Africa			
Ratherford Mwaruta	General Secretary, Zimbabwe Workcamps Association	27 March 2023	Helene Perold
Dr. Lamiel BK Phiri	Board Chairperson of the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO), Zimbabwe	28 March 2023	Helene Perold
National Coordinator	VIONet Zimbabwe	28 March 2023	Helene Perold

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