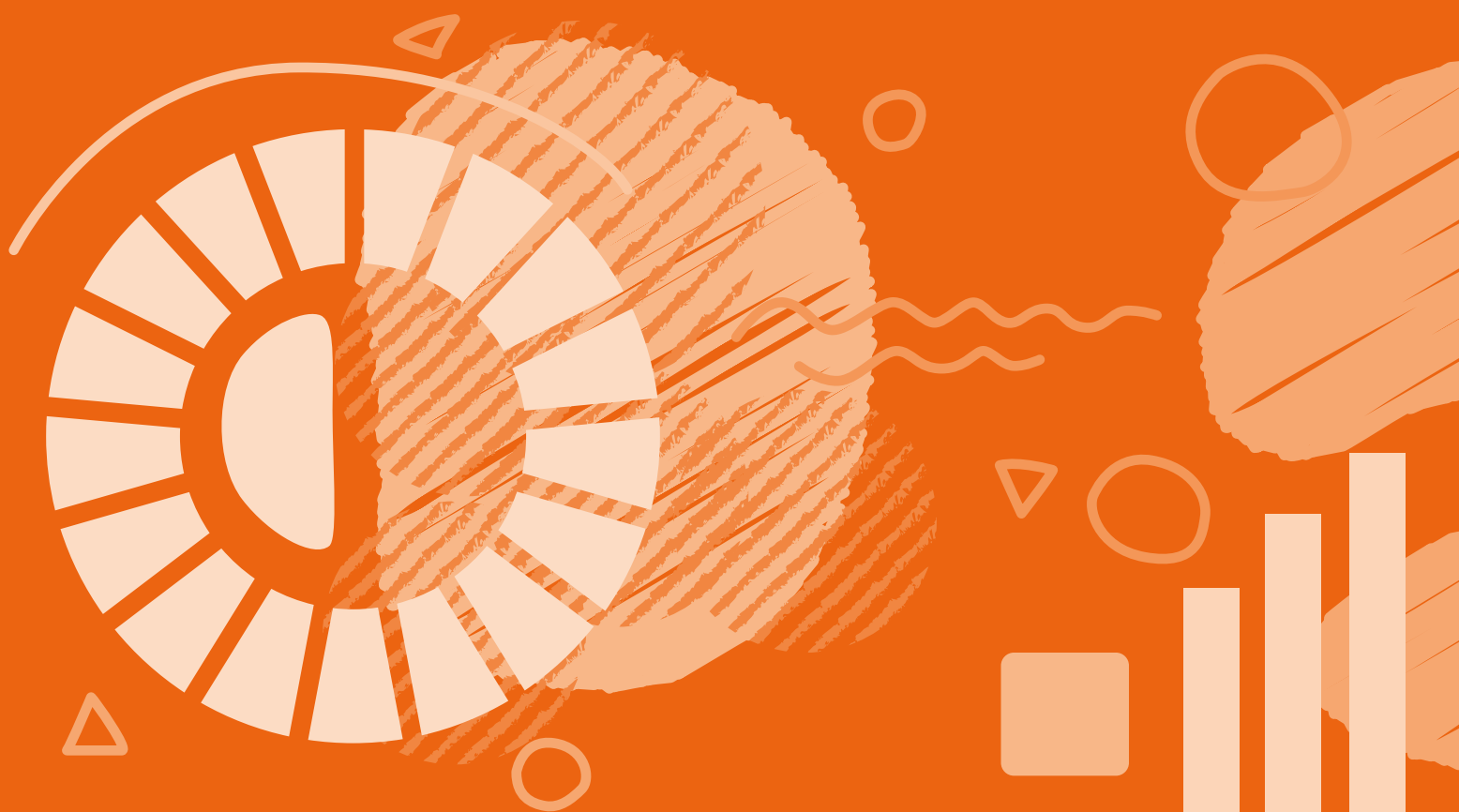

THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS IN LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND:

Supporting United Nations entities and national governments towards realizing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

RESEARCH PAPER



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ⁱ References to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999)

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ACRONYMS

CCA	Common Country Analysis
CDPF	China Disabled Persons' Federation
CPD	Country Programme Document
CHV	community health volunteer
CWAC	Community Welfare Assistants Committee
IAVE	International Association for Volunteer Effort
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organization
LNOB	leaving no one behind
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NDP	National Development Plan
SCT	Social Cash Transfer
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SWVR	State of the World's Volunteerism Report
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group
UNV	United Nations Volunteers programme
VNR	Voluntary National Review
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas
WHO	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteers are uniquely positioned to help ensure that no one is left behind. The United Nations pledge to leave no one behind entails reaching the poorest of the poor, while addressing discrimination and inequality and their root causes.

Voluntary National Reviews and United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework reports for the period 2021–2023, as well as a rich evidence base of literature from a wide range of sources, demonstrate a growing recognition of the indispensable role that volunteers play in reaching out to vulnerable people in both formal and informal settings. Through international, national and local contributions, volunteers are able to address the key factors that cause people to be left behind: discrimination, geography, vulnerability to shocks, governance, and socioeconomic status. Many volunteering activities correspond to pathways recommended by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group as key cross-sectoral strategies for operationalizing leaving no one behind. Volunteers support low-cost data collection and participatory forms of planning and monitoring. They ensure that the health along with the educational and social protection needs of underserved individuals, groups and communities are met. In many cases, volunteers are the first and last responders in natural and conflict-related crises. For women and girls, volunteers promote their rights to a life free from violence and to a livelihood. Volunteering has also created channels to challenge social norms that entrench inequality and to expand spaces for those on the margins to have influence and to demand greater accountability from a wide range of governance actors. Through peacebuilding activities, volunteering provides a means to address some of the deep-seated societal fractures that exist, particularly in conflict-affected societies, where an increasing share of the extreme poor live.

To fully realize the vision to leave no one behind, the impacts for both beneficiaries of volunteering and for volunteers themselves need to be taken into account. Intentional efforts are required to ensure that volunteering is inclusive and does not reinforce existing patterns of inequality. Emerging best practice highlights the need to overcome barriers to facilitate the participation of marginalized groups – including women, youth, persons with disabilities and refugees – as volunteers across many contexts and groups. Programmes directed towards youth model how volunteering can contribute to pathways towards decent employment, while addressing national development goals.

National governments and United Nations agencies play an essential role in creating the conditions for volunteers to thrive and to support volunteering by all, for all, with equality. Policy recommendations include integrated interventions that ensure enabling legal and regulatory frameworks, inclusive operational systems and well-resourced implementation practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Leaving no one behind (LNOB) is a commitment at the heart of the United Nations system's efforts to support Member States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. LNOB entails reaching the poorest of the poor, but the commitment also seeks to combat discrimination, rising inequalities and their root causes.¹

The growing focus by national governments and the United Nations system on leaving no one behind through volunteering builds on the recognition of volunteers' contributions to humanitarian and development goals. It affirms that achieving the 2030 Agenda requires localized and partnership-driven solutions to overcoming the disparities of opportunity, wealth and power, along with the persistent gender inequalities that are among the greatest challenges confronting the world today.²

Globally, as this report demonstrates, a wealth of data details the expansive efforts of volunteers in reaching the people who are furthest behind by providing them with services, an effort that contributes to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 1, 3 and 4. A growing body of literature details how volunteering – using advocacy, policy reform, gender empowerment and other tools – addresses inclusion and inequality by contributing to a number of targets that support the achievement of SDGs 5, 10 and 16.

Yet, volunteers are a heterogeneous group. Emerging challenges, such as inequalities in access to digital resources, affect who volunteers and in what capacity. Volunteering may be shaped by the same inequalities in gender and opportunity that, in many ways, it seeks to overcome.³ It is, therefore, important to examine these diverse realities alongside each other and to forge a way forward that supports volunteering by all, for all, with equality. Mapping the evidence against the breadth of the LNOB mandate offers an opportunity to recognize the achievements and potential of volunteering. It can also serve to identify the challenges, gaps and new directions for policy and practice.

Overall, the report aims to: (i) provide an overview of available evidence regarding the opportunities and challenges for volunteering to support LNOB; and (ii) highlight best practices in how national governments and United Nations institutions include volunteers in their LNOB strategies and develop policy recommendations on how to further embrace the integration of volunteer mechanisms in support of LNOB. Findings highlight that national governments and United Nations entities play an essential role in creating the conditions for volunteers to thrive. Ensuring that volunteering consistently promotes the LNOB agenda requires coordinated efforts across formal and informal volunteering networks and systems to provide enabling legal frameworks, inclusive operational systems and well-resourced implementation practices.

1.1 Volunteers are uniquely positioned to help ensure that no one is left behind

Volunteering is a global phenomenon, with many expressions worldwide (see box 1). In 2018, it was estimated that 1 billion people volunteer each year to help their communities or to make a difference to the causes they care about.⁴ Understanding the unique role of volunteers in LNOB builds on a growing literature documenting their role in development and in realizing the SDGs.⁵ As table 1 shows, United Nations resolutions over the past 20 years represent significant milestones in the rising recognition of volunteering as a vehicle for sustainable development.⁶

BOX 1: What is volunteering?

Volunteering exists in all societies. Volunteering takes many forms, and its expressions and meanings vary by context. The 2002 United Nations General Assembly resolution 56/38 refers to the terms volunteering, volunteerism and voluntary activities as a wide range of activities “undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor”.⁷ This definition encompasses important characteristics: the provision of time, expertise and/or labour on behalf of others is voluntary; material or financial reward is not seen as main motivating factor; and the benefits are for the general public good, beyond the volunteer’s familial circle. Volunteerism and volunteering are often used interchangeably, although volunteerism may place more emphasis on the concept and volunteering on the practice of voluntary action.

The spread of new technologies has diversified the ways in which volunteers organize and contribute. People’s voluntary actions are shaped by geography, gender, age and other social, economic and political realities. Recognizing the need for flexibility in defining volunteerism, the 2022 *State of the World’s Volunteerism Report* considers five dimensions of volunteer action⁸:

- structure (formal and/or informal)
- site (online and/or offline)
- intensity (episodic and/or regular)
- aspiration (self-building and/or community-building)
- category (service, mutual aid, participation, campaigning and leisure)

These dimensions bridge the cross-cultural breadth of meanings and practices of volunteering. A greater emphasis on volunteering in the Global South has shifted the focus beyond formal volunteering opportunities. There is a growing recognition that much of volunteering is informal and happens outside of organizational structures. It takes different forms, including both community-based activities and larger-scale mobilization of citizens, for example, in response to humanitarian disasters.⁹

TABLE 1: United Nations resolutions that mention volunteering in relation to sustainable development

2010	United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Summit committed to include voluntary associations within a broader civil society stakeholder constituency “to enhance their role in national development efforts as well as their contribution to the achievement of the MDGs by 2015” (resolution 65/1).
2012	Adoption of United Nations General Assembly resolution “Integrating volunteering in the next decade” that recognizes volunteerism as “an important component of any strategy aimed at such areas as poverty reduction, sustainable development, health, education, youth empowerment, climate change, disaster risk reduction, social integration, social welfare, humanitarian action, peacebuilding and, in particular, overcoming social exclusion and discrimination” (resolution 67/138).
2013	Adoption of United Nations General Assembly resolution “Format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development”, which identifies volunteer groups as relevant stakeholders with whom governments partner to implement the sustainable development agenda (resolution 67/290).
2015	Adoption of United Nations General Assembly resolution “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (resolution 70/1) in which “volunteer groups” are mentioned as stakeholders in the means of implementation of the new framework Adoption of UN resolution “Integrating volunteering in peace and development: the plan of action for the next decade and beyond” (resolution 70/129)
2018	Adoption of United Nations General Assembly resolution “Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (resolution 73/140)
2021	Adoption of United Nations General Assembly resolution “Fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Volunteers programme and twentieth anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers” which recognizes the linkages between volunteering practices and leaving no one behind (resolution 76/131)
2023	Adoption of United Nations General Assembly resolution “International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, 2026”, which calls for increasing links between volunteering and the 2030 Agenda (resolution 78/127)

Source: UNV website, <https://knowledge.unv.org/dataStory1/resolutions-on-volunteering.html>

BOX 2: The LNOB mandate

LNOB represents the commitment to “eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind”¹⁰ LNOB is a commitment at the heart of the United Nations system’s efforts to support Member States in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It represents the unequivocal commitment of Member States to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce inequalities so that all people may benefit from sustainable development. This is grounded in the United Nations normative standards, including the principles of equality and non-discrimination that are foundational principles of the Charter of the United Nations, international human rights law and national legal systems across the world. The cross-cutting LNOB pledge undergirds the 17 SDGs and 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda, but it is also commonly linked to the goals that relate directly to gender, income and between-group inequalities (SDG 5 and SDG 10). LNOB recognizes that to reach sustainable development, effective action is needed to reduce inequalities within and between countries, and that people who are left behind lack the choices and capabilities to participate in or benefit from human development.¹¹

The United Nations pledge to leave no one behind (see box 2) is the cornerstone of the SDGs. It requires that the furthest behind are reached first, and that patterns of exclusion and unequal power relations are addressed. There are several aspects that make volunteers distinctive actors in attending to the needs of the most disadvantaged and in contributing to the global LNOB mandate. These aspects concern the “how”, “for whom” and “what” of volunteering.

Globally, there is a natural synergy between many expressions of volunteering and the heart of the LNOB mandate. The “how” of volunteering is often characterized as relational and people-centred. By being embedded within communities, local, national and international volunteers often are able to build strong, reciprocal and long-term connections with a range of stakeholders.¹² These relationships are significant, in the light of evidence showing that improvements in service delivery may not benefit the poorest unless access to services is improved.¹³

The recognition that a great deal of volunteering occurs at the local level resonates with the localization emphasis of the 2030 Agenda, which affirms participatory action, community buy-in and local ownership as central to development.¹⁴ Often deeply immersed in religious and traditional customs, the terms used to refer to volunteering around the world frequently carry an innate understanding of solidarity and of reaching the furthest first. For example, the *Human Development Report 2021/2022* by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) notes that “Volunteerism can be seen as collective insurance rooted in solidarity” in ways that can help communities prepare for environmental shocks. To illustrate this, it describes how during seasons of high demand or drought in Sudan, communities work together through “nafeer”(calls to mobilize), to help each other plant and harvest crops. Through trust and collaboration, this practice allows them to reap a more productive harvest.¹⁵

Reviewing the intended beneficiaries of many formal and informal volunteering activities reveals a high degree of compatibility between the “for whom” of volunteering activities and the LNOB focus on women and girls, children, youth, persons with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, Indigenous Peoples, refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants, among others. As chapter 2 illustrates, volunteers are engaged in addressing the key factors identified by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) as significant in causing people to be left behind.¹⁶ These five interconnected factors are discrimination, geography, vulnerability to shocks, governance and socioeconomic status (see figure 1).

Additionally, as discussed in this report, many volunteering activities correspond to pathways recommended by (UNSDG) as key cross-sectoral strategies for operationalizing LNOB (see figure 1). These include the collection of disaggregated data, policy and legislative reform, and enhancing the quality and accessibility of services, among others.

FIGURE 1: Volunteering and LNOB



Source: Adapted from UNSDG, 2022

1.2 Volunteering can both challenge and reproduce inequality

The evidence on volunteering in relation to the SDGs and LNOB falls broadly into two related categories: alongside the emphasis on volunteer contributions to the achievement of humanitarian and development goals discussed above; and on the impacts of volunteering for volunteers themselves (see figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Towards an integrated approach to volunteering by all, for all, with equality



Source: Author's analysis

Research highlights positive psychosocial and other benefits to individual volunteers, including resources, skills and social networks. Growing attention is being devoted by volunteer organizations and policymakers to intentionally supporting volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁷ On the other hand, emerging literature, particularly in the Global South, looks at the relationship between volunteering and inequality. It argues that volunteering can reproduce patterns of inequality and exclusion through reduced access to volunteering opportunities, reinforcement of gender norms, hierarchies between volunteers and by acting as a substitute rather than as an auxiliary resource to the state.¹⁸

Particularly in the context of informal volunteering in the Global South, volunteering typically takes place among disadvantaged people rather than among advantaged people volunteering to work with disadvantaged people.¹⁹ Although the close relationship among volunteers and their communities yields significant advantages, various environmental, social and economic vulnerabilities might create obstacles to volunteering, especially for women.²⁰ Understanding how volunteering interacts with individual and collective livelihood strategies is important for state and non-state stakeholders to develop supportive policies and practices that leave no volunteer behind.

At the macrolevel, austerity measures may shift the inclination for volunteers to intervene and bridge the void left by the absence of state support. This can affect the voluntary efforts to shift away from advocacy towards delivering deficient services.

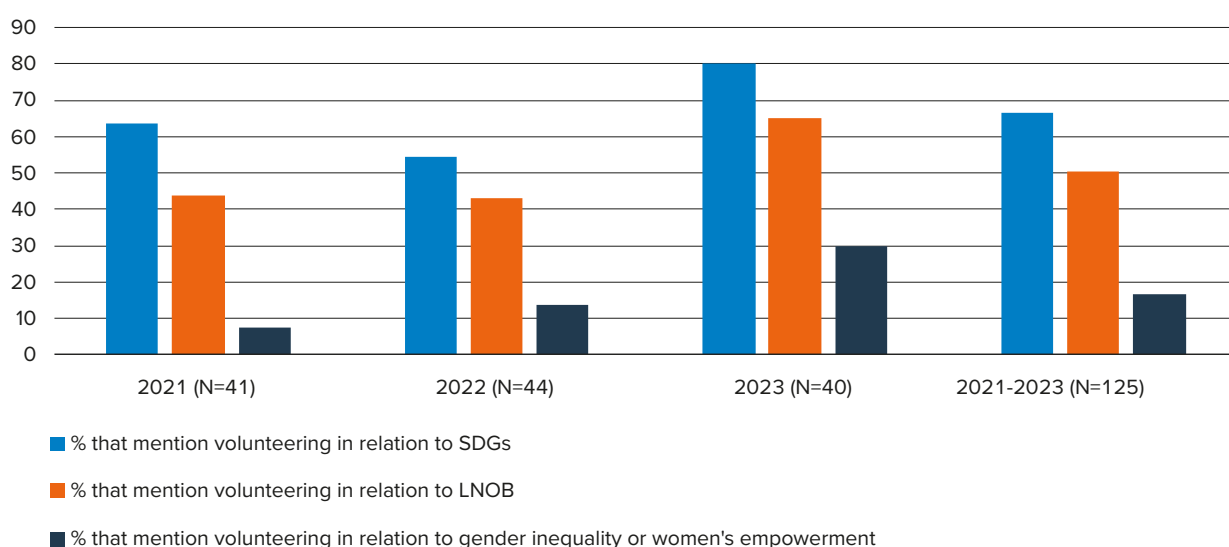
To fully achieve LNOB, the impacts for both volunteers and beneficiaries of volunteering need to be considered at individual, community and systemic levels. Examples presented in the report point to how integrated policies and programming can support volunteering by all, for all, with equality.

1.3 National governments and the United Nations system can support integrated approaches to volunteering that leave no one behind

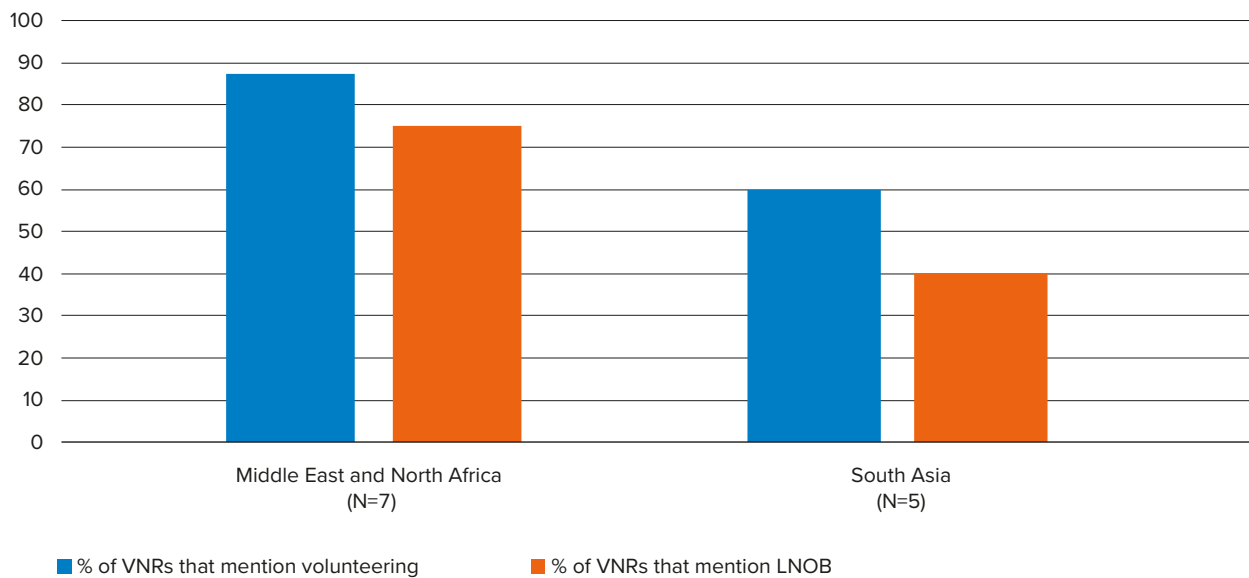
National governments and the United Nations system are key to supporting integrated approaches that encompass volunteers as well as the beneficiaries of volunteering. They can seek to direct volunteering efforts towards social and economic systems that promote greater equality.²¹ The potential of volunteering to help achieve LNOB can be strengthened by structures, systems and partnerships that build on best practice, flexibly responding to volunteering's complex yet holistic contributions.²² Chapter 3 examines interventions that can bridge volunteer-beneficiary discontinuities through mechanisms that integrate volunteer groups into national planning, participatory operational systems and sustainable implementation practices that strengthen civil society.

The commitment to recognizing and harnessing volunteering within government-level plans of action to deliver the SDGs is captured in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), a mechanism for Member States to report progress in the implementation of the SDGs at a national level to the United Nations High-level Political Forum. From 2021 to 2023, 67 per cent of VNRs included text that mentioned or promoted the contributions volunteers made to the SDGs (see figure 3). Fifty per cent of VNRs mentioned volunteering in relation to LNOB. Seventeen per cent of VNRs published in the time period referenced volunteers in relation to gender inequality or women's empowerment. VNRs in the East Asia and Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and Middle East and North Africa regions were most likely to report on LNOB in relation to volunteering (see figure 4). In addition, the qualitative analysis of VNR references to volunteering highlighted that VNRs from francophone African countries consistently linked volunteering activities to LNOB.²³

FIGURE 3: VNRs reporting on volunteering and LNOB, 2021-2023



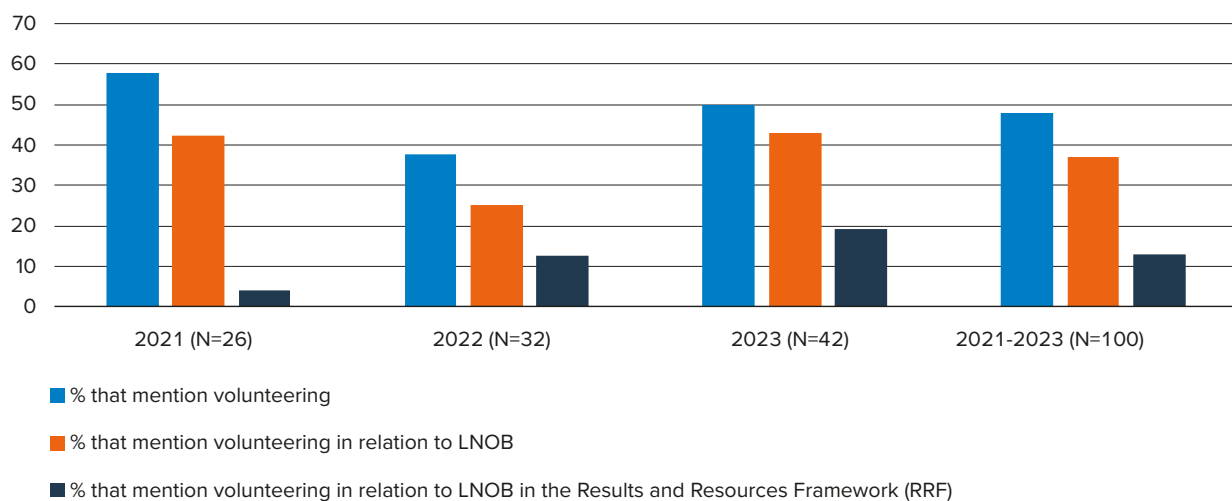
Source: Author's analysis of UNV databases

FIGURE 4: VNRs reporting on volunteering and LNOB, by region, 2021-2023

Source: Author's analysis of UNV databases

Country level UNSDCFs show similar patterns in terms of recognition of volunteering in connection with LNOB (see figure 5). Across the period 2021–2023, 48 per cent of UNSDCF planning documents integrated volunteerism into the UNSDCF text, and 37 per cent established a connection between volunteering and LNOB. In 13 per cent of these documents, an outcome, indicator or target was included in the Results and Resources Framework in which volunteering featured alongside an LNOB-related reference (see figure 5).

In several cases, VNRs and UNSDCFs mention that volunteers helped to collect data to inform the reports, ensuring that the voices of marginalized groups were represented. This was the case in Kyrgyzstan, where the UNSDCF 2023–2027 reported that it was informed by a survey that “reached out to different marginalized and vulnerable groups through various means, notably, online dialogues, face-to-face and phone interviews, as well as essays and video competitions. The key messages from the vulnerable groups were delivered through a network of interviewers and volunteers who contacted during the pandemic remote communities across the Kyrgyz Republic that do not have regular access to the Internet, so as to allow their opinions to be heard”.²⁴

FIGURE 5: UNSDCF reporting on volunteering and LNOB, 2021-2023

Source: Author's analysis of UNV databases

These findings are encouraging but also highlight that the inclusion of volunteers is not yet routinely operationalized in reporting by Member States. In many cases, there is a lack of common understanding regarding the meaning of LNOB and of its linkages to volunteering. Nonetheless, the growing reserve of data, case studies and lessons learned collectively gathered by governments, United Nations agencies and other stakeholders contributes to an expansive and granular picture of how an integrated approach to volunteering by all, for all with equality can be achieved.

1.4 Methodology and data sources

The report draws primarily on evidence from the Global South; it is focused on national and community-based (rather than international) volunteers because they contribute substantively to LNOB outcomes, but they have not been prioritized in research.²⁵ The analysis is informed by three types of data: a review of secondary literature; data related to volunteering that has been published in national government and United Nations reporting documents from 2021 to 2023; and two primary case studies. Secondary literature sources include UNV reports and case studies, peer-reviewed academic literature, as well as reports and programmatic documents from civil society, governments, and international institutions. Data in VNRs and in UNSDG reports provide the main source of evidence highlighting mechanisms for volunteers and volunteer groups to contribute to LNOB. These are examined for co-occurring references to volunteering and LNOB and for best practice examples. National and sectoral policies, as well as United Nations Common Country Analyses (CCA) and Country Programme Documents (CPD) are also cited where these provide examples of, or express a commitment to, LNOB through volunteering.

Case studies from Bangladesh and Kosovo²⁶ were selected to illustrate best practice examples. In each case, interviews were conducted with key governmental and/or United Nations stakeholders. Where available, testimonials from volunteers and beneficiaries are cited in the case studies.

Available evidence is presented in line with the main themes of the report and mapped according to recommended pathways for achieving LNOB within countries (see figure 2). Limitations in the evidence are discussed in box 3.

BOX 3: The nature of the evidence on volunteering and leaving no one behind

Assessing the impacts of volunteering on LNOB is not straightforward. Several limitations apply:

- Little consensus exists about the definition or measurement of LNOB outcomes. Although standardized approaches exist, such as the Leave-No-One-Behind Index in the Europe Sustainable Development Report, there is no globally accepted approach to measurement in each context.
- There is variation in whether available data relates to inputs, outputs or short- or long-term impacts of volunteering.
- Given the nature of volunteering, it would be challenging and ethically complex to create counterfactual conditions to experimentally evaluate its impacts on LNOB.
- Measuring and attributing LNOB impacts to volunteering may be difficult since these effects may be localized, unorganized, cross-cutting in relation to SDGs, and achieved in partnership with other stakeholders.
- The distinctive relational dimension of volunteering, which can be key to addressing inequalities and discrimination, is not easily captured through quantitative assessments; therefore, it remains challenging to assess on an aggregate scale.

Despite these challenges, enormous strides have been taken over the past two decades to document the types and volumes of activities performed by volunteers in relation to the SDGs. By drawing on a range of available quantitative and qualitative data from different sources (e.g. national governments, United Nations agencies, volunteer organizations, development and humanitarian organizations, and community/volunteer perspectives through interviews), this report seeks to offer a balanced assessment of the impacts of volunteering on LNOB.

Sources: Allum & Devereux, 2020; De Jong, 2022; Donoghue & Khan, 2019; UNSDG, 2022

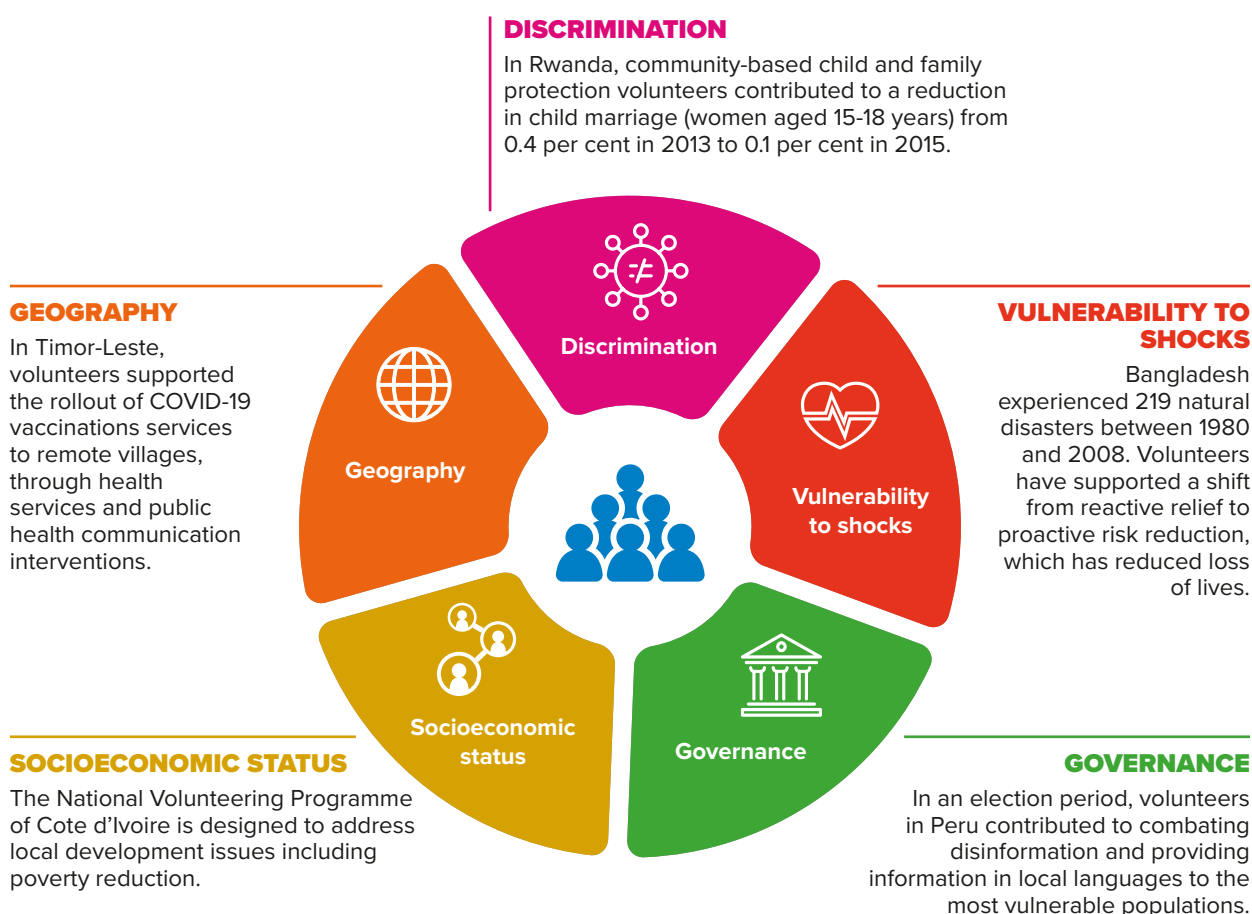
The following chapters build on the key points set out in this introductory chapter, highlighting the strong evidence that volunteering is associated with a sustained focus on the poorest and most marginalized, and foregrounding ways in which state and non-state actors can enhance volunteer contributions to LNOB.

2. A SUSTAINED FOCUS ON THE POOREST AND MOST MARGINALIZED: A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

A sustained focus on the poorest and most marginalized is a consistent feature of volunteering programmes globally. VNRs signal governments' recognition that voluntary actions strengthen their ability to reach those furthest behind first. As the Senegal VNR 2022 states: "Volunteering strives to 'leave no one behind'."²⁷

By volunteering time and skills, volunteers and volunteer groups make a tangible difference in holistically addressing the entire spectrum of factors causing people to be left behind, including discrimination, geography, vulnerability to shocks, governance and socioeconomic status (see figure 6).

FIGURE 6: Volunteering responds to factors that cause people to be left behind



Sources: UNSDG, 2022; Government of Rwanda, 2023; Government of Côte d'Ivoire, 2022; Government of Timor-Leste, 2023; Government of Bangladesh, 2020; United Nations Peru, 2022.

To illustrate the broad range of impacts that volunteers can have, this chapter presents evidence related to several key areas of focus for volunteers globally, which line up with recommended pathways to LNOB (see figure 2). These include: identifying and monitoring who is left behind; assisting with the delivery of health, education and social protection services; structuring approaches to disaster risk management; fostering gender empowerment; and advancing measures in support of inclusive governance and peacebuilding. In addition to examining the evidence on LNOB outcomes for beneficiaries of volunteering, the chapter concludes with a brief overview of considerations regarding volunteers themselves and how to ensure that no volunteer is left behind.

2.1 Identifying and monitoring who is left behind

Identifying who is left behind is a critical first step towards addressing their needs. Through participatory action and proximity to disadvantaged communities, volunteers contribute to identifying needs and gathering disaggregated data that can make visible the most marginalized groups – those who might otherwise have been overlooked. Case studies across the world highlight the unique role of volunteer groups and organizations in identifying the needs of those who face multiple interlocking and re-enforcing inequalities. For example in Lebanon, an association that operates through volunteers identified migrant domestic workers as among the most vulnerable groups in the country.²⁸

Identifying who is left behind is a dynamic process, one that is shaped by global and national challenges such as urbanization, environmental degradation, increased migration and demographic changes.²⁹ Mental health needs have increasingly featured in volunteer accounts and priorities, introducing new groups of those left behind and intersecting with existing layers of disadvantage. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Thailand VNR 2021 reported that volunteer organizations identified increased rates of depression among children and youth.³⁰ In Montenegro, a volunteer working on a national project with soup kitchens and food banks, when asked what users needed, responded, “It is not just food, but psychological help as well.”³¹

At local and national levels, identifying and monitoring who is left behind requires the collection of disaggregated data for groups identified as being at risk of poverty, exclusion and inequality within each particular national context. Indeed, lack of disaggregated data has been identified as one of the biggest obstacles to progress towards the SDGs.³² Participatory data-collection initiatives in Bangladesh³³, India³⁴ and Thailand³⁵ have been central to raising the capacities of poor urban and rural communities to articulate and prioritize their needs, empowering them to develop locally relevant solutions. Participatory approaches can be rolled out on a large scale. From 2017 to 2018, over 3,200 volunteers in 90 districts and 27 states in India collected information about the needs and priorities of more than 1.7 million people. This effort allowed rural communities to collect, share and respond to data at scale on the issues that affect them.³⁶ These case studies draw attention to the importance of viewing volunteers, including informal volunteers, not only as data collectors but also as actors capable of identifying the root causes of issues and co-creating measures to address them.³⁷

Digital platforms offer innovative possibilities for detailed and participatory data collection, which can involve new cohorts of volunteers but which can also reveal the contours of unequal access to digital infrastructure. In Kenya, informal settlement residents volunteered their time and knowledge with the Muungano Alliance to develop unique profiling tools and community mapping methods. They collected data to better understand the situation in the city’s slums, which are typically absent from the government census.³⁸ Crowdsourced data platforms using participatory geographic information systems and volunteered geographic information often rely on volunteers with local knowledge; a programme for malaria prevention included youth volunteers in the mapping of building and road infrastructure in Mozambique and Kenya.³⁹ While these programmes have been shown to facilitate the provision of tailored aid and development to marginalized communities and to support disaster preparedness, care is needed to overcome the socioeconomic, information and digital disparities that may exclude digitally underserved populations from accessing and contributing to these resources.⁴⁰

2.2 Assisting with the delivery of health, education and social protection services

The sustained involvement of volunteers in service delivery is well documented. A distinctive strength of volunteering is its ability to engage and provide support for multiply disadvantaged groups who often are either reluctant or unable to engage with formal state services.⁴¹ Evidence demonstrates how volunteers are essential to extending the reach of public health (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4) services to some of the poorest and most marginalized communities. The involvement of volunteers in social protection (SDGs 1, 5 and 10) is less widely documented but is starting to be established, particularly in disaster risk-response interventions.

Health services for all

In line with the LNOB mandate, volunteers' contributions consistently ensure the extension of preventive and curative health services to those who are the hardest to reach. Large scale vaccination (including for COVID-19 and children's diseases) and infection control (tuberculosis, Ebola virus disease, malaria) programmes often rely on volunteers for their implementation, particularly to reach remote and marginalized communities and to ensure high vaccination rates. Volunteers have supported vaccination campaigns for the control of childhood and other diseases (SDG target 3.8) in many countries across Asia and Africa, and they are mentioned as key actors in vaccination programmes in VNRs from Democratic Republic of the Congo, Fiji, Timor-Leste, Eritrea and Malaysia.⁴² In Eritrea, volunteers contributed to the provision of vaccination services to young children through mobile health units, enabling the inclusion of nomadic groups and those residing in extremely remote areas, and ensuring coverage rates above 95 per cent.⁴³ The Malaysia VNR 2021 commended the polio vaccination campaign conducted in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic: "The successful collaboration among Government, volunteers and other agencies, as well as the trust of parents and caregivers to make informed decisions, ensured that all children were fully vaccinated against polio."⁴⁴

In the control of epidemics (SDG target 3.3), volunteers feature prominently as first responders. In Uganda, over 20 national UN Volunteers, most of them hosted by the World Health Organization (WHO), responded to an Ebola outbreak in September 2022, contributing to the Ministry of Health and WHO declaring Uganda Ebola-free in January 2023.⁴⁵ Exemplifying the surge in volunteer mobilization in response to COVID-19 reported by Member States, the Fiji VNR 2023 reported that, with the support of 122 trained volunteers, 99 per cent of the target population had been vaccinated against COVID-19.⁴⁶

Community health volunteers (CHVs) are central to many national health systems striving to achieve universal health coverage and to end nutrition and health disparities, particularly in the Global South. These volunteers are predominantly female, and they live and work in underprivileged, marginalized communities with limited resources or a lack of access to quality health care.⁴⁷ Large numbers of community health volunteers in Malaysia, Niger, Zambia, Pakistan, Thailand and Timor-Leste are integrated into the mainstream provision of health-care services. They typically are responsible for leading health education campaigns, implementing preventive health measures, collecting data, offering health referrals and providing last-mile delivery of health services.⁴⁸ As an example of scale, the Thailand VNR 2021 reported the engagement of more than 1 million village health volunteers.⁴⁹

These extensive volunteer networks prove their value by positively enhancing their communities. In Nepal, female CHVs helped reduce maternal mortality (SDG target 3.1) from 539 per 100,000 live births in 1996, to 239 per 100,000 live births in 2015; this reduction was achieved through the delivery of promotional, preventive or curative community-based health-care services.⁵⁰ In Mozambique, home-based care provided by volunteers and health activists to patients with AIDS and their relatives rose from 17,790 beneficiaries in 2004 to 99,122 in 2008.⁵¹ In Thailand the presence of volunteer health networks was credited with the successful containment of COVID-19 for the first 15 months of the pandemic and with the maintenance of child nutrition services when national school schedules were suspended.⁵² Similarly, volunteers in Timor-

Leste ensured continuity of health service delivery, including in remote communities, during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵³

In addition to recognizing the important contributions of CHVs to improved health outcomes, there is also growing attention to the opportunities and challenges faced by volunteers and whether their central role in the delivery of services depends on or challenges the inequalities they face.⁵⁴ Research has highlighted that CHVs are frequently undertrained and under-resourced and often engaged to make up for a shortage of health workers. Moreover, they incur costs, including transportation, which are frequently not covered. Low levels of compensation lead to high rates of attrition, which undermine the overall effectiveness of the community-based programmes.⁵⁵ Box 4 examines some of the interventions that can address the needs of CHVs.

BOX 4: Addressing the intersectional needs of community health volunteers

Research from India,⁵⁶ Brazil⁵⁷ and Africa⁵⁸ has highlighted recruitment, capacity-building, remuneration and recognition as aspects that need to be considered to achieve equity-centred and gender-sensitive solutions for CHVs. Importantly, how each of these is addressed in practice may differ according to context.

Supporting inclusive recruitment is important, since evidence suggests that when programmes recruit the most socioeconomically marginalized women, they tend to be more inclusive of other disadvantaged households.⁵⁹ However, due to practical considerations around attrition rates, women are at times selected due to logistical reasons, such as having “a good husband” or not having children.⁶⁰ The selection of women may also reinforce traditional and community expectations around unpaid care.⁶¹ Care is, therefore, required to ensure that gender empowerment values are embedded into recruitment practices.

Investment in capacity-building and regular skill development training programmes is key to empowering CHVs, as well as realizing health system impacts. However, recognizing and addressing the time, childcare and travel costs required for women to engage in training is essential for ensuring their participation, particularly for those with the fewest resources.⁶² To design training programmes around the holistic needs of women, strategies to support their psychological, economic, social and political empowerment need to be considered. A rural programme in Kenya, for example, identified the need to invest in the livelihoods of CHVs through context-relevant income-generating activities (such as farming and events management) in consultation with the CHVs and in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other stakeholders.⁶³

Remuneration of CHVs is a critical issue that is raised consistently in relevant literature. Remuneration through stipends and other incentives offers a means of valuing the opportunity cost of women’s time and recognizing their contribution. Importantly for LNOB, payments can allow more marginalized women to participate, which may be key to making more equitable and efficacious impacts. Concerns around remuneration regard distortions of volunteers’ motivations, and research suggests that payment is not suitable as a sole strategy for improving performance.⁶⁴ Consistency, fairness and transparency around remuneration practices are essential.⁶⁵ In addition, a livelihoods approach has been proposed as providing a more nuanced way to account for remuneration. This approach seeks to facilitate sustained volunteering by and within marginalized communities by understanding the social, economic, political, physical and environmental assets that volunteers and their communities have at their disposal.⁶⁶

BOX 4: Continued

Lack of recognition emerged as a concern for CHVs in some studies. CHV programmes not only interface with formal health systems but also with community systems involving actors such as local political structures, civic groups and faith-based organizations. Addressing potential causes of stigma and discrimination means ensuring that these linkages ensure that CHVs feel respected for their work by formal health workers and by community members. For example, in some studies, CHVs described feeling stigmatized by fellow health care workers who treated them differently because they were not formal health workers within the health facilities. Some CHVs identified the provision of uniforms, training and educational qualifications as positive factors influencing their perceptions within their communities.⁶⁷

Inclusive education

Ensuring universal access to quality education, particularly for the neediest and most vulnerable, is a critical element of the 2030 Agenda. Evidence recorded by United Nations organizations and national governments, as presented in this section, highlights the role of volunteering in contributing to educational outcomes. This includes reaching rural and remote areas and extending digital access to educational resources.

Placing volunteer teachers in rural areas has made tangible, positive impacts on students' educational attendance and attainment outcomes. Since 2018, the National Agency for Volunteerism in Togo has adopted a digital data-collection system, to quantify the contribution of national volunteers to the achievement of development goals, including in the education sector. During the 2018–2019 school year, 368 volunteer teachers at the lower secondary level helped 1,470 pupils pass the lower secondary national diploma; this represents 2.4 per cent of the national total. At the upper secondary level, 721 volunteer teachers helped 2,223 pupils pass the upper secondary examination; this represents 12.07 per cent of the national total.⁶⁸ Increasing attendance and reducing absenteeism requires creative solutions to overcome the intersectional barriers that exclude marginalized groups from receiving an education. The Chile VNR 2023 reports that volunteer tutors, as part of the government's National Education Reactivation Plan, helped to reinforce reading and writing skills.⁶⁹ As a result, absences fell by 13 per cent in less than a year. In Zambia, food insecurity was identified as a root cause of high dropout rates and low student enrolment and attendance rates. To address students' nutritional needs, volunteers participated in the Home-Grown School Meals Programme, supervising and preparing meals in schools.⁷⁰

Volunteers have been instrumental in bridging the digital divide in education, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. To address the challenges posed by remote learning for students in Sri Lanka who lacked adequate Internet facilities, volunteers supported a programme that awarded data scholarships to 100,000 students of rural and low-income families, an effort that UNV documented. In Brazil, teachers volunteered to prepare educational videos to be displayed on community television to ensure that children who could not access online platforms could still receive an education.⁷¹

Evidence recorded by United Nations organizations and national governments highlights the role of volunteering in delivering preschool services where these are not available, ensuring that children are ready for primary education; this effort aligns with SDG target 4.2. A three-year programme in Senegal resulted in a higher rate of enrolment of girls in preschool and primary education. After the programme ended, local communities continued to maintain it.⁷² In a large programme in Türkiye, 1,727 volunteer teachers participated in a programme, established by the Ministry of Family and Social Services and the Ministry of National Education, to provide 50,000 vulnerable children with educational resources to foster play-based learning.⁷³

Volunteering activities in education typically require a significant allocation of resources. The “Basayen Anagathayata” programme (“To the Future by Bus”) in Sri Lanka provides an innovative example of reusing resources in new and creative ways. Approximately 500 volunteers transformed 25 decommissioned Sri Lanka Transport Board buses into modern, fully equipped libraries for students attending underprivileged rural schools.⁷⁴

The need to invest in volunteers was highlighted in Ghana, where low budgetary support for staff capacity-building was identified as a key challenge to the sustainability of volunteer efforts to establish adult literacy classes in many rural communities.⁷⁵

Collectively, these examples demonstrate the role that volunteers play in addressing gaps in the formal provision of services and in establishing linkages that enable disadvantaged groups to access mainstream services. They also detail the need for ongoing flexibility in responding to emerging challenges that require resource mobilization and innovative solutions.

Social protection for marginalized groups

There is a growing role for volunteers in social protection. As a cross-cutting intervention, social protection is considered an important pathway to several SDGs and to realizing the LNOB mandate.⁷⁶ The compatibility between volunteering initiatives and social protection systems is recognized in the Egypt UNSDCF 2023–2027, as a means “to reach those that are at risk of being left behind and to ensure that their voices are heard and reflected”.⁷⁷ Volunteers who are assisting with social protection systems and crisis response play an important role in identifying beneficiaries and implementing programmes, emerging evidence shows (see box 5).

BOX 5: Volunteers in social protection in Zambia

Community Welfare Assistant Committees (CWACs) were established in Zambia to support the implementation of the Social Cash Transfer (SCT) programme by the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services. The CWAC volunteer cohort consist of members elected by the local community where the programmes are being implemented. In 2003, the SCT was implemented on a pilot basis in Kalomo District. Twenty years later the programme has been extended to 116 districts with over 1 million beneficiaries. The role of CWACs in the Social Cash Transfer programme is to assist with its implementation, in particular the dissemination of information about the programme in their communities, as well as overseeing payments to beneficiaries. CWACs are also involved in other programmes that fall under the SCT, such as The First 1,000 Most Critical Days Programme (MCDP), which is a nutrition programme to support parents and families. The Zambia VNR 2023 states: “The contributions made by the volunteers under the SCT and social welfare and health-related programmes have been immense with about 90,006 Volunteers working under health and 87,750 volunteers for the various programmes under MCDSS.”

Sources: Government of Zambia, 2023; Data collected by UNV in Zambia.

Globally, national social protection systems were strengthened significantly in response to COVID-19. A global review of social protection measures recognized the involvement of volunteers in the provision of social assistance in several contexts.⁷⁸ For example, one of the largest in-kind social protection programmes

was put into effect in Iraq by the “National Campaign of NGOs and Volunteering Groups to Respond to COVID-19 Impact”, which reached nearly 1.9 million beneficiaries through in-kind grants.⁷⁹ In another example, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection in Belarus oversaw a programme in which social workers and volunteers, located in every district of the country, delivered food and medicine and provided support to 830,000 elderly people and persons with disabilities.⁸⁰

This signals a new area of engagement for volunteers, increasingly sought after by governments and institutions promoting social protection, opening up new avenues to reach the marginalized at scale, including in humanitarian contexts.

2.3 Structuring approaches to disaster risk management

The importance of volunteers in disaster risk management is globally recognized, including those areas from which international actors and donors have withdrawn or are unable to reach.⁸¹ Across the globe, the participation of informal and “spontaneous” volunteers has become increasingly visible, particularly in response to natural disasters.⁸² Through the delivery of relief, as well as early warning systems, volunteers directly address SDG goals 11 and 13, supporting the adaptive capacity of communities to address climate-related hazards. In Bangladesh, natural disasters linked to climate change have adversely affected 135 million people. Supported by UNDP, the training of 65,000 volunteers in disaster response management has helped to shift the country’s response posture from reactive relief to proactive risk reduction, resulting in a drop in the number of lives and livelihoods lost through disasters.⁸³

The role of volunteers in disaster preparedness and response is widely documented in Member State policy planning and reporting documents⁸⁴ and in United Nations organization planning and assessment documents.⁸⁵ Attention by volunteers to reaching marginalized populations, including refugee and displaced populations, is a recurring theme. In its National Development Plan 2019–2022, the Eswatini government reports that community volunteers have been trained on risk reduction and response, including in providing rehabilitation efforts for the houses of disaster victims.⁸⁶ The distinct advantage of volunteers in providing disaster relief is aptly summed up in the Nepal CCA: “Volunteers at the grassroots level ... are often the first responders during disasters and in providing immediate assistance to victims/survivors. As volunteers come from the affected community, they are in a better position to quickly respond than other aid providers who do not benefit from the same geographical proximity and local knowledge. Also, many public and private organizations are often bound by pre-determined limitations such as finite project duration, scope and budget, which cause these organizations to leave the affected community once the objective of their interventions has been achieved. Thus, it is the volunteers and other groups intrinsic to the community that are left to address residual needs and to seek solutions to longer-term challenges.”⁸⁷

With specific reference to conflict settings, a review of evidence gathered by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) found that volunteers often operate within highly fragile situations, complex emergencies or within protracted conflicts in which few formal structures remain, providing aid, medical care and other services.⁸⁸ This is exemplified in Sudan, where, following the onset of violent conflict in 2023, a network of more than 2,000 volunteers in 18 branches across the country worked to ease the plight of people unable to flee and impacted by significant reductions in essential goods and services such as health care, power, water and food.⁸⁹

While local volunteers can bring significant benefits to understanding and navigating the local environment, including social and cultural norms, they also face many security and other challenges. There is a risk that volunteers are perceived as partisan, either because they are from the affected communities or because of perceived links to external organizations. This places a responsibility on governments and humanitarian organizations to ensure that local humanitarian volunteers are trained, equipped and respected by all as trusted providers of relief during times of crisis.⁹⁰

2.4 Fostering gender equality and women's empowerment

As one of the two SDGs specifically focused on inequality, addressing gender equality is key to realizing LNOB; it is a major focus of many volunteering activities, especially through efforts to counter gender-based violence and to ensure that women and girls increasingly participate in and lead decision-making in political and economic spheres.

Many volunteer programmes address gender-based violence and provide sexual and reproductive health services, which are critical in remote and rural areas.⁹¹ The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and UNDP take the lead in programming to reduce gender gaps and the levels of gender-based violence (see box 6).

BOX 6: Empowering women and girls in Bangladesh: community volunteers help to increase school attendance and address early marriage

The Women and Girls Empowerment Through Education and Skills in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (WGETES) project, funded by Global Affairs Canada, is a subcomponent of Strengthening Inclusive Development in Chittagong Hill Tracts (SID-CHT) project of the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and UNDP.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts in southeast Bangladesh are characterized by steep, mountainous terrain. The communities there are diverse, and people speak many distinct languages and have unique cultures and traditions. Prior to the 1997 Peace Accord, the region experienced decades of conflict that left it isolated from mainstream national development initiatives. Women and girls experience many layers of disadvantage due to high levels of poverty, remote geographic locations, and other cultural factors that limit their ability to access opportunities.

Since 2019, the WGETES programme has sought to improve the quality of education and offer Indigenous girls and women economic and social advancement opportunities. To address key barriers to girls' school attendance, the programme recruited 300 local female volunteers and stationed them in local schools. These volunteers raised awareness of reproductive and sexual health issues, distributed dignity kits and facilitated safe spaces for girls to discuss the stigmatized issues of menstruation management and gender-based violence. Describing the programme's impacts, Jhuma Dewan of UNDP said: "The contribution has been immense. Parents, teachers (including the male teachers) and students all expressed their appreciation for the opportunities to discuss previously taboo topics." Since its inception, the programme has succeeded in significantly improving enrolment and retention rates of girls across 300 primary, secondary and skilled-based educational institutions.

The programme has also mobilized community-based volunteers through mothers' and women's groups who take preventive measures to counter violence against women within their respective communities. Members of these groups meet regularly and inspect the sanitation facilities within their children's schools. The collective impact of this grass-roots network of volunteers is evident in the story of Ayesha Khatun, a member of a mother's club in one of the programme's primary schools. Upon completing her school examination at age 14, her eldest daughter started receiving marriage proposals. Determined to prevent her daughter from becoming a victim of early marriage, and resisting her neighbours' criticism, Ayesha enrolled her daughter in secondary education. She recounts: "I am grateful for becoming a member of mother's club because of WGETES project initiatives. It brought a new hope for myself. By participating in various workshops and being part of the club, I am more confident." Appreciating the group's support, she added: "I am not alone to fight against early marriage and educate my daughters."

BOX 6: Continued

Importantly, as Sonia Mehzabeen, UNV representative in Bangladesh, remarked, the deployment of volunteers within their own communities creates opportunities to build up communities from the inside. Volunteers witness tangible results from their efforts, awakening a legacy of civic engagement that outlasts the project itself.

Conveying appreciation for UNV's volunteering mandate, Prodip Kumar Mahottam, Additional Secretary (Development), Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and National Project Director of the SID-CHT Project, affirmed the role of the government in creating an enabling environment for volunteers and promoting the empowerment of women and girls. He highlighted the importance of mainstreaming gender concerns in all government programmes and allocating targeted budget streams and quotas for the social and economic progression of women and ethnic minorities.

Sources: Interviews; UNDP, 2023

The mobilization of volunteers at the local level is a vital part of changing social norms and spreading awareness around sexual and reproductive health. The Burkina Faso VNR 2023 reported that the action of more than 8,000 volunteers made it possible to raise awareness about sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence, early marriage, forced marriage, excision, sexual assault, rape and sexual abuse.⁹² In Thailand, volunteer members of community-based Women's Development Committees used data-collection processes and public relations campaigns to address root causes of inequality and violence against women and children.⁹³

The engagement of men in gender transformation has also emerged as an important factor in reports on volunteer involvement. In Sierra Leone, reported incidents of gender-based violence halved in an area where Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) was working with local volunteers as male advocates and peer health educators.⁹⁴ A male gender equality and inclusion volunteer in Bénin stated: "I was able to develop close and trusting relationships with people who, at first contact, were resistant. In fact, the deep roots of certain religious and cultural beliefs constitute a major obstacle."⁹⁵

Innovative digital and media-related strategies have supported initiatives to address deeply rooted inequalities. Harnessing digital technologies in Nigeria as a result of COVID restrictions, UNFPA helped to establish surveillance systems led by community volunteers that protected 3,335 girls from female gender mutilation.⁹⁶ In Pakistan in 2019, UN Women and UNV used various communication platforms to reach marginalized populations and engaged community volunteer groups to develop radio programmes for gender equality awareness. The programme trained 35 female and 25 male community volunteers in information and communication technology, radio production, script writing and broadcasting, enabling them to run the community radio broadcasts.⁹⁷

Volunteer action has been mobilized to promote gender parity across all levels of decision-making in political and economic life. Accelerating women's economic inclusion requires investing in women-owned businesses and reducing the unpaid care and domestic burden for women and girls.⁹⁸ Evidence gathered by UNV in Tanzania portrays how volunteers can use multidimensional approaches to further livelihood and gender empowerment. At the policy level, UN Volunteers working with UN Women supported the Tanzania

Ministry of Industry and Trade in its review of the 2003 Small and Medium Enterprise Policy. This policy is vital in promoting the full participation of women in economic growth. At the local level, volunteers supported the Pastoralist Women Council to enable 100 out-of-school adolescent girls gain to access second-chance education. In addition, they disseminated information about sexual and reproductive health rights and about ways to engage in green livelihood businesses.

Identifying political empowerment as a key aspect of addressing gender inequalities, volunteer networks are involved in amplifying spaces for women in public participation, as examples from Pakistan and the Central African Republic illustrate. The Aurat Foundation in Pakistan is a national non-governmental organization (NGO) that coordinates district level networks of voluntary citizens groups and organizations, with the aim of enabling women's entry into legislatures and local representative bodies.⁹⁹ As part of the "Support for the Electoral Process in the Central African Republic 2019/2020" project, financed by the UNDP and implemented by UN Women, 280 community volunteers were trained to support the electoral work of six prefectural offices, according to the Central African Republic VNR 2023. The effort focused on mastering the electoral process, the challenges of women's political participation and community mobilization techniques.¹⁰⁰

Across these three areas, which together contribute to combating gender inequalities, the relational nature of volunteering remains pivotal. A cross-national study reviewing the role of international volunteers in gender equality and women's empowerment concluded that interpersonal interactions based on trust greatly strengthened contributions to gender equality outcomes in both formal and informal spaces. But it also noted that these outcomes could be jeopardized by a disregard for local culture and behavioural norms.¹⁰¹ Taken together, these findings highlight how volunteers contribute to transformative outcomes for women. By accounting for women's social vulnerabilities, volunteers use multi-faceted interventions to create economic and political opportunities for women. Volunteers can also foster the creation of environments that allow participants to develop their own capacities.

2.5 Advancing measures in support of inclusive governance

The antidote to development processes that leave people behind is greater representation of, and participation by, those consistently excluded. The 2015 *State of the World's Volunteerism Report: Transforming Governance* found that volunteerism contributes to enhancing the voice and participation, accountability and responsiveness of a range of governance actors and institutions around the world.¹⁰² Research on volunteering and governance presented in this section highlights several key areas of volunteer action, including advocacy for human rights, legal reform and the mobilization of volunteers within and outside of formal governance structures to expand available spaces for agency and expand the influence of marginalized groups at local, national and international levels.

Across the world, volunteers are engaged in advocacy efforts representing the social, economic, political and environmental rights of marginalized groups, as varied examples demonstrate:

- Community-based volunteers in Kyrgyzstan worked with state authorities to help refugees to obtain citizenship, enabling them to live legally in the country.¹⁰³
- In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, youth volunteers have advocated for equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQ+) populations.¹⁰⁴
- A UN Volunteer in Chad who is a legal adviser, human rights specialist and disability activist has helped equip over a hundred civil society organizations with human rights monitoring equipment to investigate cases of illegal detention and human rights violations.¹⁰⁵

Legal reform can result from sustained advocacy efforts around human rights in which volunteers support trust-building among stakeholders, ensuring the protection and participation of marginalized and vulnerable groups. The Tuvalu Family Health Association, assisted by volunteers and as part of a larger campaign network, successfully pushed for a legislative amendment repealing corporal punishment in schools in 2017.¹⁰⁶ Volunteers and disability rights-based organizations in Pakistan, with the support of VSO, were key catalysts in the drafting of the “Islamabad Capital Territory Rights of Persons with Disability Act”. This was the first law in the history of Pakistan to specifically protect the rights of persons with disabilities and promote their political participation.¹⁰⁷

Broadening opportunities for participation in governance, inclusive decision-making and access to justice is key to addressing the structural inequalities that chronically leave people behind. Trends to decentralize power to the local level, particularly in Africa, Asia and Latin America, have opened up opportunities for volunteers in local governance structures.¹⁰⁸ In Nepal for example, a shift to a federal form of government opened up opportunities for local informal institutions to engage in deliberative decision-making processes.¹⁰⁹ Similarly in Rwanda, volunteers work with the voluntary mediation committees institutionalized in the Rwandan justice system to handle disputes and promote social cohesion and negotiation before actions reach formal courts.¹¹⁰

Volunteers also operate outside formal governance structures to ensure their voices are heard and that governments are responsive to their needs. On an international scale, the My World Survey brought the voices of 7 million people into the political deliberations on the SDGs. Volunteers translated the survey into different tribal languages and took it to rural communities to make sure that even the most remote communities had a voice in national planning and implementation for the SDGs.¹¹¹ At the national level in Guatemala, volunteer-led campaigns in Indigenous communities have fought for the right to consultation in the face of development projects involving natural resources.¹¹²

Volunteerism at the local level can build the capacity of marginalized people to work in alliance with local governments as well as national or international civil society organizations. Yet volunteers can also face challenges that limit their ability to challenge inequalities. Invited spaces for volunteer participation may be dominated by elites with more education, access to economic resources or connections to decision makers who crowd out groups with less influence.¹¹³ These challenges can be overcome. In Uttarakhand, India, local networks of female volunteers, supported by a local community-based organization, developed the skills and knowledge to challenge invisible power hierarchies that previously had restricted their access to local government structures.¹¹⁴

Efforts to increase the political participation of young people have harnessed new technologies to create interest and momentum across a broad range of contexts. Under the heading of “Youth for Better Local Governance”, the Cambodia VNR 2023 reports on the activities of youth organizations that provide capacity-building both in urban and rural areas, giving youth volunteers opportunities to connect with local authorities and initiate their own projects to be implemented in local communities.¹¹⁵ In Zambia, engagement through social platforms by youth supported a rise in citizen participation. During the 2021 general election, a rapid increase in access to digital technology enabled youth to volunteer online in political mobilization activities.¹¹⁶ Possible risks also need to be considered in the mobilization of youth in national volunteering initiatives to ensure that governments’ involvement in recruitment remains neutral and does not politicize the participation of youth in volunteering in a divisive manner.¹¹⁷

Taken together, the evidence shows how volunteering can give voice to stakeholders and mobilize civil society to contribute to solutions. Through supportive actions – and by creating a fair and transparent environment – governments, civil society organizations, and bilateral and multilateral development actors can enable vulnerable and excluded people to have a say in the decisions that impact on them, including those at the United Nations and in other global forums.

2.6 Advancing measures in support of peacebuilding

Peacebuilding activities enable volunteers to engage with root causes of exclusion. They provide a means to address some of the deep-seated societal fractures that exist, particularly in conflict-affected societies where an increasing share of the extreme poor live.¹¹⁸ United Nations Reports of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace have stressed the value of volunteers in conflict reduction, noting, for example, the important role of UN Volunteers in engaging local actors in peacebuilding processes.¹¹⁹ The inclusion of volunteer women mediators in Niger as participants on land commissions to prevent conflict over natural resources role has also been cited as an example of community volunteerism in the context of locally owned and sustainable peacebuilding efforts.¹²⁰

Building and keeping a culture of peace is a dynamic process that requires interventions tailored to each context. In fragile situations, local and international volunteers are particularly well-suited to peacebuilding through enhancing interpersonal contact among people from different backgrounds in ways that build social cohesion and bridge social divisions across ethnic, religious, age, income and gender lines.¹²¹ There is a growing body of evidence detailing how volunteers contribute to promoting cultural understanding, intercultural dialogue and other intangible skills central to building durable peace.¹²² The Neighbourhood Volunteer Scheme in Kenya was established to build social cohesion in direct response to inter-ethnic conflict following disputed elections. The programme – initiated in 2008 by UNDP, UNV and the Government of Kenya – trained 928 “neighbourhood volunteers” in reconciliation skills in order to mobilize residents to receive internally displaced persons. Within a year of the scheme’s initiation, at least 65 per cent of displaced persons were resettled and reintegrated into their communities.¹²³ A different approach was adopted in Malawi, where in order to strengthen institutional capacities for sustaining peace and social cohesion, UNDP helped to establish District Peace Committees that engaged volunteers as monitors, mediators and educators. These formal structures enabled community volunteers to successfully mediate local conflicts and electoral disputes in several districts.¹²⁴

Peacebuilding interventions involving volunteers have been found to be particularly effective among youth. The Burundi CCA 2023 commended the peace clubs and community dialogues in all of the country’s provinces for enabling young people, including young volunteers from different backgrounds (political parties, religious denominations, civil society), to participate in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.¹²⁵ In Sudan, the collaborative project “Youth Volunteers Rebuilding Darfur” involved young people in strengthening the links between volunteering, peace and sustainable livelihoods. A volunteer in that programme said: “We need more education, financial programmes for beekeepers and protection plans for farmers. But without peace, there won’t be development, and this project is giving us some tools to make it possible”.¹²⁶ Across societal divides, evidence in Sri Lanka offers a positive illustration of youth volunteering as a means for facilitating whole-of-society partnership and engagement. In the 2022 Sri Lanka United Nations Country Team results report, volunteering is recognized as unique in its scope to reach and support communities and especially vulnerable groups.¹²⁷ Youth participation has given rise to a new form of political volunteerism against political corruption and economic mismanagement. Partnerships among international agencies, local NGOs and the media are credited with mobilizing volunteers, especially youth, to assist with peacebuilding efforts in response to three decades of violent conflict.¹²⁸

As many countries grapple with influxes of refugees, volunteers are also engaging in activities to support bridge-building between host and migrant communities. Across the Global North and Global South, volunteering benefits both host and migrant communities and provides an avenue for newly arrived groups to participate in society, develop new connections and encourage a sense of belonging.¹²⁹ Through their work, volunteers from host communities and migrant populations help dismantle prejudices about migration and provide information, training (language and education), support and material assistance that is essential to building the capacities of migrants.¹³⁰ Practically, a review of the IFRC observed that volunteer organizations involved in the process of integration are most effective when they have greater engagement with diversity through translating materials and undertaking targeted recruitment drives, providing cross-cultural training for existing staff and establishing physical offices or centres within new or emerging communities.¹³¹

2.7 Leaving no volunteer behind

As this chapter has discussed, volunteerism is increasingly celebrated as a significant vehicle for promoting peace and development in the Global South. A holistic LNOB approach also entails a closer look at volunteers themselves, to ensure they, too, reap the full benefits of volunteering. Volunteering can act as a pathway to inclusion, particularly when marginalized groups are intentionally recruited as volunteers.¹³² Yet, evidence also shows that volunteering is shaped by social inequalities, making it harder for some groups to volunteer.¹³³ Understanding the types of barriers that volunteers may face and the broader systems of social hierarchies in which volunteering occurs can lead to the development of tailored strategies to overcome these barriers.

Volunteering can in itself be a pathway to LNOB. It is often the first route through which individuals begin to actively engage in their community and become empowered to realize their rights, towards greater inclusion and public participation.¹³⁴ Referring to the participation of Indigenous Peoples, José Francisco Calí Tzay, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, writes in the UNV 2020 Global Synthesis Report: “Volunteering is a vital channel for indigenous peoples to self-organize and empower themselves around their own priorities. Volunteering nurtures collective and context-specific strategies to address problems. This is especially important for marginalized peoples and groups that lack access to political power and resources.”

Developing strategies to broaden the pool of volunteers requires understanding how differences in location, access to formal and informal structures of volunteering, age, education and sex affect volunteers’ ability to participate equally or on equal terms. Complementary interventions may be required to overcome barriers faced by potential volunteers. The Russian Federation, which successfully introduced a wide range of policies and programmes to support volunteering by older persons, offers a case study of how to apply this approach (see box 7). The need for inclusion strategies was described by a representative of the Fundación Futuro Latinoamericano (Latin American Future Foundation), cited in the SWVR 2022: “[w]hen we create a project, we think about quotas for women, indigenous people etc., that will allow them to participate. This includes paying for their transport, for a place where they can leave their children”.¹³⁵

BOX 7: Increasing volunteering among older persons in Russia

Between 2013 and 2020, the number of people over 55 years of age involved in volunteering in the Russian Federation increased from 3 per cent to 9 per cent of the total Russian population. Nearly 30,000 volunteers aged 55 and over are currently engaged in the programme through more than 300 organizations. Several factors were identified as key to increasing volunteering among older persons.

Developing a new narrative: Communication strategies were needed to portray older adults as competent and independent while also recognizing their agency and their ability to contribute to sustainable development.

Gathering evidence on the benefits to older adults of volunteering: Recognize how older persons, known as “silver volunteers”, benefit from their work. Among the perks are improvements in quality of life by creating a sense of belonging, ownership and satisfaction, informed the principle of lifelong volunteerism, which has guided the national strategy for supporting volunteers.

Partnerships and high-level endorsement: The development of silver volunteering in Russia was prioritized at the presidential level and promoted by the government in coordination with national and local volunteer involving organizations. The Association of Volunteer Centres, the largest volunteer involving organization, partnered with the government to implement the nationwide “Young in Soul” programme.

BOX 7: Continued

Integration into sectoral policy and strategy: The National Strategy for Action for the Benefit of Senior Citizens in the Russian Federation until 2025,¹³⁶ which was adopted in 2016, integrated volunteering into the government’s policy of “active longevity”.

Capacity-building: The Young in Soul programme developed tailored training for both volunteers and managers, including guidance and good practices on organizing volunteering activities for older people and information on healthy ageing.

Creating opportunities to volunteer: Since 2019, the Association of Volunteer Centres has been running www.dobro.ru, the largest online platform for volunteering-related resources in the Russian Federation. The site takes its name from the Russian word for kindness (*dobro*) and includes two online platforms: one that connects volunteers with opportunities and another for learning, with specific materials on silver volunteerism.

Recognition: A forum for silver volunteers takes place every October in the Russian Federation to celebrate the International Day of Older Persons and annual national contests like “Volunteer of Russia” recognize existing initiatives and provide support to encourage new projects involving older volunteers across the country.

Source: UNV, 2020

Informal volunteering within humanitarian and development contexts in the Global South typically occurs among disadvantaged people rather than from advantaged to disadvantaged people.¹³⁷ While the proximity of volunteers to their communities generates important benefits, it is also likely that volunteers experience the same vulnerabilities to environmental, social and economic shocks as those they seek to assist. Practical barriers, rooted in poverty and weak infrastructure, can hamper the efforts of community-based volunteers in low-income circumstances. Time-use survey results indicate that people in low- and middle-income countries must devote over one-third more of their time earning a living than their counterparts in high-income countries.¹³⁸

These factors are accentuated for women. Poor women often find it hard to access formal volunteering structures for reasons including childcare responsibilities, mobility, illiteracy, lack of experience in public spaces or money for transport and other community expectations.¹³⁹ Despite these barriers, poor women perform a great amount of volunteering; their efforts, however, are rarely recognized or funded, and they typically do not lead to the kinds of opportunities that may arise from other forms of volunteering.¹⁴⁰

Volunteering is harder in contexts where patterns of exclusion are entrenched, the voices of marginalized groups are curtailed, and the risks of raising issues are high.¹⁴¹ Within communities, powerful interests and prejudices related to gender, class, caste and ethnic differences within communities can restrict local volunteers’ agency.¹⁴² In response to these barriers, the nature of relationships and partnerships between individuals, community institutions, public institutions and international bodies involving volunteers need to intentionally foster dynamics that empower those from marginalized backgrounds.¹⁴³

Governments, United Nations agencies and organizations involving volunteers all play a key part in ensuring that people in excluded and/or marginalized communities increasingly can use volunteerism as a vehicle for being heard and gaining access to the services, resources and opportunities they need to improve their lives. They also can help to ensure that enabling conditions like freedom of speech and association are already in place, creating the conditions for volunteers to flourish.

2.8 Economic inclusion of youth through volunteering

Large-scale youth volunteering programmes as a route to social inclusion have been documented by many governments, providing synergistic benefits for youth volunteers and for beneficiaries of volunteer programmes. These are directed towards both volunteer and beneficiary-centred aims in three ways:

- activating youth in the realization of SDGs¹⁴⁴
- political participation¹⁴⁵
- economic empowerment of youth¹⁴⁶

Addressing high levels of youth unemployment is a concern for many countries, given the negative impact it has both on the development of youth as individuals and on national development outcomes. Many young people experience exclusion from job opportunities in increasingly high-skills economies owing to insufficient education and are restricted in their ability to access the labour market and productive livelihoods.¹⁴⁷ As the case study in box 8 illustrates, volunteering opportunities with an economic empowerment dimension provide young people with skills, experience and, potentially, opportunities to access employment or self-employment.¹⁴⁸

BOX 8: Dual benefits of volunteering for youth employment and services for vulnerable populations in Kosovo¹⁴⁹

The “Response to COVID-19 Emergency and Early Recovery Support” project was implemented at the end of 2020 until 2022 by UNDP Kosovo and funded by the European Union. The project was developed as a practical response to a surge in the needs of vulnerable populations in a time of crisis.

In collaboration with UNV, 40 community volunteers were recruited and allocated to the municipal Centres for Social Work (CSWs) across Kosovo to provide an immediate human capacity boost and innovative energy for the CSWs. Volunteers strengthened CSWs’ ability to deliver equitable social services to vulnerable families, women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities. Offered at a time when a large number of social workers were approaching retirement age, the programme provided professional experience for a new generation of potential social workers.

To overcome the linguistic barriers that typically prevent beneficiaries from accessing services in a multi-ethnic context, volunteers were recruited within their respective local municipalities. Milica Božović Milićević, a volunteer in the programme, expressed the sense of personal fulfilment she derived from the placement: “Volunteering at the Center for Social Work is all about being ready to support communities. This is the reason why I love it.” Tahir Halilaj, a fellow volunteer, described an 8-year-old boy who was neglected, malnourished, hungry, barefoot, and aggressive at their initial meeting as a result of the violence he had experienced. Over time Tahir shared how the well-being, attitude and mental health of the boy drastically changed. “Even today, I still go and check on him to see how he is doing. I had an extraordinary experience with him, and through this experience I followed up the progress and understood how important my work and the work of our centre is.”

BOX 8: Continued

Amid high rates of youth unemployment, Marta K. Gazideda, the UNDP programme manager, described how the 24-month programme was designed to assist young graduates to break out of the cycle where “you can’t get a job because you don’t have experience and you can’t get experience because you don’t have a job”. The opportunities offered by the programme to access employment and gain the necessary professional experience to become licensed as a social worker were identified as key benefits by volunteers themselves. Berlina Dushi, a volunteer who was later employed in a full-time position in her municipality’s CSW, echoed this sentiment: “I was fortunate enough to have been given the opportunity to work as a UNV when I did, because I feel it has given my career a kick-start.”

Recognizing the psychologically and administratively intense nature of the work, Marta K. Gazideda emphasized the care taken in designing the programme to ensure that ongoing personal and professional training and support was provided to the volunteers. The programme was an effective partnership with UNV, the Department of Social Policies and Families, the CSW, and the University of Prishtina. These efforts ensured that volunteers remained resilient and successfully completed the programme, with several of them later finding employment within the sector.

The multiple benefits of the well-designed programme have been recognized as a model for empowering youth through volunteering. Hekuran Murati, Minister of Finance, Labour and Transfers in Kosovo, expressed his appreciation for the programme as an investment in young people and in the country’s development: “The training of the new generation of social workers is welcomed by the institutions as a means of socioeconomic development, which also aligns with our priority for youth employment. The contribution of these social workers to support the Social Work Centres, in their efforts to improve the welfare of the citizens, was highly appreciated.”

Sources: Interviews, <https://undpkosovo.exposure.co/reaping-the-fruits-of-volunteering>; <https://undpkosovo.exposure.co/passion-for-change-young-social-workers-in-kosovo-lead-the-way>; UNDP, 2022b

In the face of the tangible resource constraints faced by many young people – and within the broader economic context in which they function – two key areas need to come together for youth volunteering programmes to realistically act as a pathway to inclusion through employment and self-employment. First, volunteering programmes need to be accessible to youth from a diversity of backgrounds and incorporate a strong element of learning in the form of skills training and experiential learning through service. Flexible recruitment strategies can support positive transition outcomes for different groups, including vulnerable youth, creating alternative pathways to increased employability.¹⁵⁰ United Nations Country Teams have been instrumental in building and supporting youth development programmes that ensure equal access to opportunities regardless of gender or socioeconomic status. For example, the United Nations Country Team in Jordan used initiatives such as a life skills programme, a job search clubs methodology and a digital skills programme to help youth build their careers, engage with local communities and participate in the labour markets. Through their outreach efforts, they brought refugees, persons with disabilities and those in remote areas in contact with these programmes. Building on these inclusive programmes, the National Youth Engagement and Volunteering Movement Platform (NAHNO), through which the United Nations matched volunteering opportunities to 25,239 adolescents and youth (68 per cent female), has been adopted by the Ministry of Youth as the national volunteering platform.¹⁵¹

Secondly, to increase young people’s chances of accessing employment and to support national development goals, volunteering programmes need to align with national economic growth and SDG priority areas. To this end, youth service programmes can provide young people with technical skills, qualifications and livelihood opportunities that increase their employability or chances of self-employment. United Nations inter-agency

partnerships, joint programmes and shared strategies offer important contributions to youth employability pathways. For example in Nigeria, connections between the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth (ILO, UNICEF, UNDP) and Inclusive Youth Volunteering (UNV, UNDP) – together with other stakeholders¹⁵² – have opened employment pathways for youth. In another example, since January 2019 the United Nations has assisted the National Volunteer Programme of Cameroon in its efforts to support the contributions from young people to the country’s development. National volunteers have been channelled to assist in education, health and agropastoral areas.¹⁵³

These programmes, tailored towards youth, provide remarkable examples of efforts that focus extensively on the empowerment and capacity-building of the volunteers themselves and on ways to open opportunities to people who have been marginalized. The examples from around the world also draw attention to the need for multi-stakeholder partnerships to effectively link volunteer programmes with the structural economic context and the national development plans of each country. This approach can ensure that LNOB is a central concern that encompasses both volunteers and beneficiaries at local and national levels.



3. INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND THROUGH VOLUNTEERING: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Conclusions

Volunteering offers an evidence-based and hopeful track for whole-of-society action towards peace and development and realizing the global LNOB mandate. VNRs and UNSDCF reports for the period 2021–2023, as well as a rich evidence base of literature from a wide range of sources, demonstrate a growing awareness of the distinctive and sustained role that volunteers play in reaching out to vulnerable people in both formal and informal settings. The recognition that much of volunteering occurs at the local level, resonates with the localization emphasis of the 2030 Agenda, which affirms participatory action and local ownership as central to development.

Globally, by contributing time and skills, volunteers and volunteer groups make a tangible difference in holistically addressing the entire spectrum of factors causing people to be left behind, including discrimination, geography, vulnerability to shocks, governance and socioeconomic status. Many volunteering activities correspond to pathways recommended by the UNSDG as key cross-sectoral strategies for operationalizing leaving no one behind. Volunteers provide health, education and social protection services to underserved individuals, groups and communities. In disasters and crises, volunteers are often the first to arrive and the last to leave, offering assistance even in places other stakeholders are unable to reach. Volunteers can help to identify and monitor the needs of left behind populations who would otherwise remain unnoticed. Volunteers campaign and advocate for gender equality and against gender-based violence. For those who are excluded from participation in local and national public spaces, volunteers make direct contributions to their ability to participate and to have influence over their own development trajectories.

Volunteers are a heterogenous group, and volunteers may simultaneously seek to address injustice for others while remaining themselves trapped in the same exclusionary systems they seek to dismantle. Volunteering is shaped by the same inequalities in gender and opportunity that, in many ways, it seeks to overcome. Emerging best practice demonstrates how intentional efforts are needed to ensure that volunteering is inclusive and does not reinforce existing patterns of inequality.

National governments and United Nations entities play an essential role in pursuing the well-being of both volunteers and beneficiaries of volunteering and aligning volunteering agendas with national LNOB strategies. The following policy recommendations examine some of the specific areas in which action by national governments and United Nations entities can support continued progress towards realizing the goal of volunteering for all, by all, with equality.

3.2 Policy recommendations

United Nations entities and national governments are central to the creation of an environment that enables volunteerism to flourish and fully contribute to realizing the sustainable development agenda. They can work in partnership to ensure that volunteering consistently addresses all the factors that leave people behind, and that voluntary activities are increasingly aligned with recommended LNOB pathways including disaggregated data collection, policy reform, social protection and actions to support gender equality.

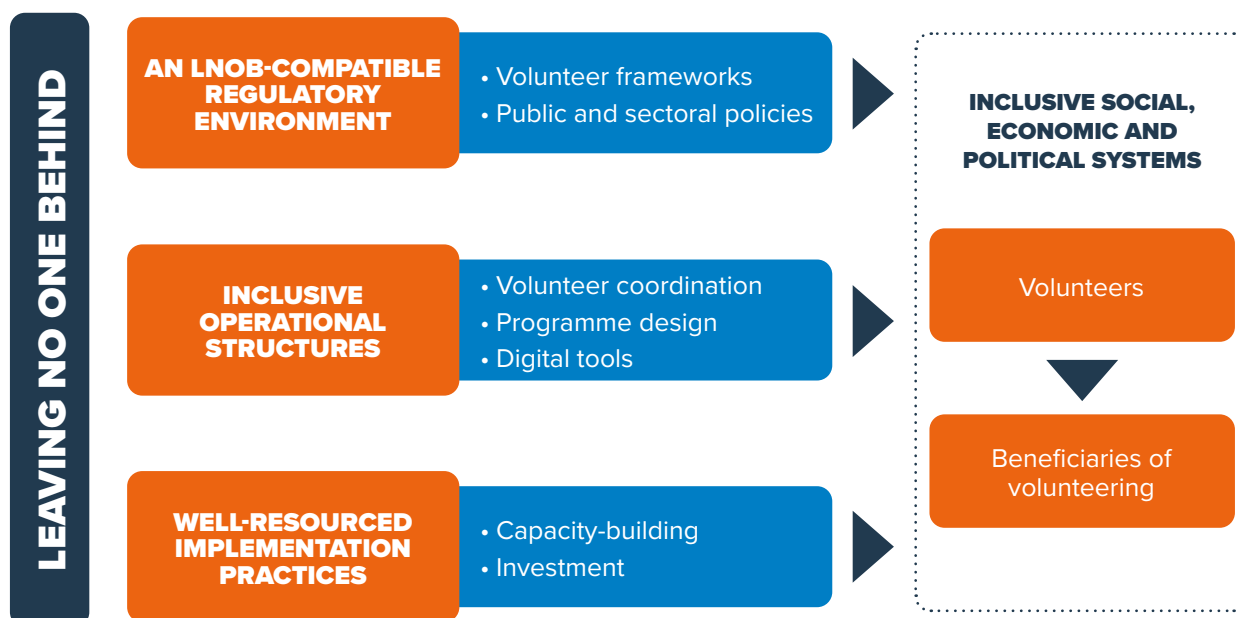
Building on their successful efforts in promoting the measurement and mobilization of volunteering towards the realization of the SDGs in each country, national governments and United Nations agencies can develop strategies and targets to institutionalize LNOB within the vision, policies, coordination, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of voluntary activities. The integration of volunteering into planning and strategy documents, such as NDPs and UNSDCFs, and into monitoring reports, such as VNRs, provide an excellent way to track the contributions of volunteers to LNOB.

An integrated approach to LNOB requires interventions that simultaneously consider the needs of volunteers and the outcomes for beneficiaries while also creating synergies with inclusive social, economic and political systems.

Three intervention areas for United Nations entities and national governments are considered here (see figure 7). These span the volunteer ecosystem and can ensure that voluntary actions are directed towards amplifying the voices and influence of those who are most marginalized:

1. An LNOB-compatible regulatory environment: This type of regulatory environment considers volunteer policies and the breadth of public policy in a holistic manner, seeking to facilitate environments that support and protect volunteers and linking their efforts to sustainable impacts for the poor and marginalized.
2. Inclusive operational structures: These are needed to facilitate flexible coordination mechanisms and to address digital disparities.
3. Well-resourced implementation practices: Volunteering initiatives that are supported by capacity-building and investment in infrastructure serve the interests of volunteers and programme beneficiaries.

FIGURE 7: Integrated interventions towards leaving no one behind through volunteering



Source: Author's analysis

Specific policy recommendations with illustrative examples are listed for each these factors in the sections that follow.

A LNOB-compatible policy and regulatory environment: volunteer frameworks

Volunteer policies can facilitate enabling regulatory environments that support and protect volunteers and link their efforts to sustainable impacts for the poor and marginalized. Over the past two decades, legislation and national policies specific to volunteering have expanded and consolidated globally.¹⁵⁴

Volunteer frameworks can promote the inclusion of disadvantaged and marginalized groups as volunteers and also ensure their needs are met. Those needs may encompass training, information and organizational support, health and safety, and measures to counter social marginalization and discrimination. Volunteer policies can establish good standards that protect and provide for volunteers especially when volunteers are operating in humanitarian or remote contexts.¹⁵⁵ They can also address barriers that restrict their ability to volunteer. For example, the Organic Law on Citizen Participation¹⁵⁶ in Ecuador encompasses volunteering and promotes equality of opportunities, recognizing the need for affirmative action in favour of women, Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized groups.¹⁵⁷ While well-developed legislation and policy can include provisions designed to overcome barriers and promote diverse and inclusive volunteering, some volunteering frameworks can also lead to exclusion. Highly formalized regulations may create bureaucratic requirements that are too burdensome, particularly for small organizations, limiting their capacity to recruit volunteers and contribute sustainably to community resilience and development.¹⁵⁸

Volunteer frameworks can also act as vehicles to facilitate greater public participation of volunteers. In Uzbekistan, the adoption of the new law on volunteering activities¹⁵⁹ promoted cooperation between volunteers and state departments¹⁶⁰ and the inclusion of volunteers in public councils at each state agency. In Paraguay, careful attention was directed to including volunteers and volunteer groups in the deliberative process of drafting policies on volunteering.¹⁶¹

On a broad scale, in order to create strong linkages with public policies and overarching national strategies oriented towards LNOB, volunteer frameworks need to intentionally align with national development policies and consider the interplays between volunteering and other legislative frameworks. For example, the Sri Lankan National Policy on Volunteerism,¹⁶² approved in August 2019, was developed through a collaboration between the Ministry of Social Empowerment and Primary Industries of Sri Lanka and UNV to establish volunteerism as a key contributor to achieving the SDG targets and 2030.¹⁶³ Likewise in Burundi, legislation on volunteering¹⁶⁴ was intentionally integrated with wider policy priorities rooted in the country's national sustainable development plan for 2025. These efforts to align laws and policies specific to volunteering with national agendas are important for creating coherent intersections with national and sectoral policies, as discussed in the next section.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments, supported by United Nations agencies, can create an LNOB-compatible policy environment by ensuring that volunteer frameworks:

- address volunteers' needs for training, financial incentives, information and organizational support, and measures promoting health and safety and countering social marginalization and discrimination
- promote the representation, participation and policy involvement of disadvantaged and marginalized groups and seek to address barriers that restrict their ability to volunteer

A LNOB-compatible policy and regulatory environment: national and sectoral policies

An important means of activation of volunteering for LNOB involves embedding volunteering within national and sectoral laws and policies. UNV encourages national governments to gather data on the inclusion of volunteering within national and sectoral policies and legislation at the country level. For example, UNV found that in Rwanda, the Ministry of Local Government's National Strategy for Sustainable Graduation 2022,¹⁶⁵ recognized community volunteers as one of the key pillars of the framework designed to help low-income households graduate from poverty.

Several VNRs and government plans include examples of policies related to health (e.g., Iraq VNR 2021¹⁶⁶), disaster response (e.g., Philippines NDP 2023–2028¹⁶⁷) and youth strategies (Malaysia NDP 2021–2025¹⁶⁸) in which references to volunteering are linked to provision for vulnerable groups. In relation to gender, the National Gender Policy Framework 2022¹⁶⁹ developed by the Ministry of Planning Development and Special Initiatives in Pakistan commits to creating avenues for advancing female leadership, mentorship and volunteering engagement to meaningfully integrate their voices in public programme design and policy decisions.

These examples provide important indications of how volunteering can be mainstreamed into laws and policies across the span of public policies in ways that align with LNOB strategies. Devoting particular attention to aligning volunteering with policies that address economic disparities in labour markets and counter gender inequalities in social care provision can help to reduce obstacles to volunteering and promote access to decent work. These policies work in synergy with legislative environments that protect the freedoms and rights of those at the margins of society.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments, supported by United Nations agencies, can create an LNOB-compatible policy environment by:

- establishing links between volunteering and the needs of marginalized groups in national development plans and sectoral policies, such as those related to health, disaster response, gender and youth strategies
- embedding volunteering within cross-sectoral policies that can produce sustained benefits for the poorest and most disadvantaged, including policies on equality, social care, and labour-related matters, helping to promote access to decent work and valuing caretaking
- collecting data on the inclusion of volunteering within national and sectoral policies and legislation at the country level and VNRs and consistently report on volunteering in relation to LNOB
- including volunteering in cross-sectoral LNOB strategies towards realizing national development plans and the SDGs in UNSDCFs and CPDs

Inclusive operational structures: volunteer coordination

Volunteer coordination is a complex process, particularly as national volunteering networks and schemes continue to expand.¹⁷⁰ Coordinating volunteering efforts towards LNOB requires effective administrative and technical systems, as well as a willingness to develop grass roots initiatives and support devolved forms of volunteer governance. Many countries have a diversified coordination structure that includes more than one type of coordinating body.¹⁷¹ The Mexican VNR 2021 recognizes that volunteering spaces are extremely diverse and, therefore, may require different forms of organization, depending on their nature;

humanitarian support may, for example, require specific forms of organization.¹⁷² The need for multiple forms of governance is accentuated in the Global South in settings characterized by a greater prevalence of informal and community-based volunteering.¹⁷³

The coordination function performed by national platforms, coordinating bodies and networks can amplify efforts to reach marginalized and vulnerable groups and communities in three ways:

1. **Mobilization and recognition of volunteers:** In Tanzania, research conducted by UNV reported volunteer activities around events such as World AIDS day. In Kazakhstan, after declaring 2020 as the Year of the Volunteer, the number of voluntary organizations in the country increased three-fold, from 200 to 600 in less than two years, with support offered to more than 1.5 million citizens in need during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷⁴
2. **Scaling up of programmes:** For example, the “Volunteers for My Community” scheme, a national youth programme led by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in Cambodia, was established as a pilot in 2019 and later scaled up to a national programme in 2021. It now operates across 25 provinces.¹⁷⁵
3. **Promoting standardized good practice and lines of regular communication:** For example, the Kazakhstan VNR 2022 identifies a clear role for the government in mobilizing and coordinating volunteers in support of disadvantaged groups, through developing guidelines in priority areas, delivering training courses for coordinators of volunteering activities, and by creating a “single information line”.¹⁷⁶

In order to promote LNOB, the coordination role of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders needs to be carefully balanced with a focus on preserving the localized nature of many volunteering initiatives. United Nations Country Teams play an important role in supporting governments to ensure that coordination mechanisms remain relevant and accessible to volunteers and volunteer groups, including from marginalized groups. The Kazakhstan UNSDCF 2021–2025 recognizes the importance of decentralization and engagement at local and regional levels: “Support of greater decentralization and participation of civil society and volunteer groups in formulating regional and local development plans and decisions will seek better inclusion of local priorities and the needs of women, youth, persons with disabilities, the unemployed and others in plans, which is crucial for building trust in the government and to consolidate communities to implement the SDGs.”¹⁷⁷

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments and United Nations agencies can contribute to inclusive operational structures by:

- supporting national platforms, coordinating bodies and networks to amplify efforts to reach marginalized and vulnerable groups and communities by scaling up programmes, rapidly responding to emergencies, standardizing good practice and facilitating lines of regular communication across institutions and stakeholders.
- ensuring that volunteer coordination mechanisms are also decentralized to the local level. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches are needed to mainstream volunteering into national, sectoral and local structures of governance, while preserving the organic, relational and independent nature of many expressions of volunteering.

Inclusive operational structures: Volunteer programme design

Analysing the cycle of volunteer programme design through a LNOB lens foregrounds the importance of two key considerations: attention to the inclusion of marginalized groups as volunteers and ensuring that participatory approaches are embedded in the design of programmes.

Inclusive programming can mobilize, recognize and support volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Intentionality in reaching marginalized groups is signalled in the Maldives Strategic Action Plan 2019–2023 which aims to “conduct a programme to promote volunteerism among youth and young adults, and within representative segments of the population (women, elderly, foreign migrant workers)”.¹⁷⁸ Tailored strategies can be designed to attract and equip different groups such as youth or older persons, reflecting the diversity of barriers that they face. In addition, recognizing the existing contributions of volunteers from a variety of volunteering traditions needs to inform programming. For example, the Pakistan UNSDCF 2023–2027 recognizes the need to inventory communities’ Indigenous knowledge, traditional techniques and practices.¹⁷⁹

Participatory approaches are needed at every level to ensure that volunteer activities are designed to promote greater inclusion and representation. VNRs and United Nations documents offer good examples of commitments to mainstreaming inclusion and participation as overarching goals of volunteering programming (see table 2).

TABLE 2: Volunteering for inclusion and participation in VNRs, CPDs and UNSDCFs

The Latvia VNR 2022 commits to laying “the foundations for an active civil society by strengthening participatory mechanisms in planning, decision-making, and the implementation processes of various initiatives, and increase the status of volunteering in society”.¹⁸⁰

UNFPA’s Tunisia CPD locates volunteerism within a transformative framework by committing to apply “a human rights-based and gender transformative approach across all the thematic areas of programming, and adopt results-based management and inclusive and participatory approaches, while leveraging innovation and integration of volunteerism to achieve results”.¹⁸¹

The Bolivia UNSCDF 2023-27 states that volunteering, as an expression of active citizenship, should aim to promote “the participation of the traditionally most vulnerable groups or excluded from participation and in the formulation and monitoring of public policy proposals, strategies and programs”.¹⁸²

Participatory methods help understand the interdependent systems within which volunteers operate, thereby facilitating interventions aimed at redressing unequal structures.¹⁸³ Evaluations conducted by volunteer organizations have found that a common frustration expressed by local actors occurred when external organizations held pre-defined notions of how to tackle an issue or only consulted with local leaders in a community.¹⁸⁴ In line with a culturally-sensitive and inclusive approach to volunteering, the Fiji VNR 2023 recognizes that: “strong partnerships with volunteers should be formed to leverage local knowledge and expertise. This will ensure more tailored and responsive development interventions for those who need them the most, as well as foster shared social responsibility.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, participatory approaches can help

to ensure that programmes are designed to reflect the needs and experiences of those individuals most directly affected by poverty and marginalization.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are typical of the design of many programmes involving volunteers, including international and local actors, public-private partnerships and relationships between informal and formal volunteering groups and organizations. The manner in which partnerships are conducted, and not just their outcomes, matters towards realizing inclusion that addresses power inequalities in ways that amplify the voices of marginalized populations. Evidence confirms the need to intentionally include participatory practices into the mechanics of collaboration between partner organizations through long-term, sustained partnerships based on a shared understanding of local experiences and knowledge in locations where there is endemic poverty and marginalization.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments and United Nations agencies can contribute to the design and delivery of programmes that address LNOB through volunteering by:

- ensuring that all voluntary activities are gender-sensitive and use tailored strategies to mobilize volunteers from a range of disadvantaged backgrounds
- including volunteers from marginalized populations in the design of programmes and plans
- expanding opportunities for marginalized groups to influence decisions and also by broadening ownership of development agendas
- encouraging women and other marginalized groups working within voluntary organizations to consider not only “entry level” positions but also leadership positions
- fostering long-term partnerships informed by local experiences and knowledge
- including volunteering in the planning and design of cross-sectoral LNOB-oriented programmes detailed in national development plans and UNSDCF and other United Nations planning documents focused on the achievement of the SDGs in each country context

Inclusive operational structures: digital tools and platforms

Digital technology poses both opportunities and challenges for governments and United Nations agencies in supporting participatory and inclusive volunteer operations. Internet and cellular-mediated digital platforms, along with social media networks, have brought in new volunteers. Online systems have been developed to recruit, register, certify and assign volunteers, effectively matching supply and demand for volunteers at the community level. Remote volunteering serves in a wide range of functions, from gathering data in real time during humanitarian and natural disasters, to offering counselling services, to mobilizing advocacy efforts. Crowdfunding also allows volunteer groups to raise money for specific purposes.¹⁸⁶

However, despite its potential, technology alone cannot overcome the barriers faced by some traditional groups of volunteers such as older people who may not be adept in the use of technology. Similarly, socioeconomic differences can influence who benefits from new technologies, with poorer communities and rural populations having more limited access to digital technology, funding, and partnership and mobilization opportunities.¹⁸⁷ Phone ownership is significantly lower for women, potentially limiting their access to digital volunteering opportunities.¹⁸⁸ These divides are aggravated by the algorithms of many online search engines, which tend to prioritize larger opportunities over smaller opportunities, setting disproportionate barriers at the local level.¹⁸⁹

Investing in digital infrastructure and complementary digital and non-digital solutions while also adhering to data protection best practices are key to harnessing the potential for broader participation that digital technologies make possible. While promoting volunteering through digital mechanisms, care must be taken to avoid exacerbating digital inequalities.¹⁹⁰ For example, the Uzbekistan VNR 2023 documents how an electronic platform system designed to meet the employment needs of youth including volunteering opportunities, has been complemented by the establishment of a new organization to provide services to the unemployed population.¹⁹¹ Likewise, the Thailand VNR 2021 recognizes that mechanisms for online volunteering offer opportunities, but also require additional technical expertise to manage emerging systems and tools for the effective coordination of volunteers.¹⁹²

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments and United Nations agencies can promote LNOB through digital approaches to volunteering in three ways:

- facilitate online volunteering by marginalized groups who may benefit from reduced travel time and costs
- provide guidance, regulation and incentives to facilitate additional investments in digital infrastructure for digitally marginalized communities and innovative capacity-building programmes to increase inclusion
- develop and apply regulations to protect the data and confidentiality of volunteer and beneficiary users, particularly those in vulnerable groups

Well-resourced implementation: capacity-building

Volunteer training programmes are not standardized and take many forms around the world.¹⁹³ Yet, to remain functional and sustainable over time, volunteer programmes depend on a continuous investment in volunteers' capabilities and knowledge. A review of references to capacity-building in United Nations and national government documents highlights three major areas that are especially relevant to realizing the LNOB mandate. Each is necessary for an integrated and cohesive approach:

1. **Programme-specific training:** This should be offered to allow volunteers to learn how to perform particular tasks, such as health or disaster risk management training, to ensure that volunteer services are inclusive and delivered to a high standard.
2. **Volunteer-oriented training:** This should be tailored to the particular needs and personal development of volunteers, for example employability skills and digital inclusion. Such trainings can focus on the needs, strengths and skill-gaps of each group.
3. **SDG-related training:** This should involve capacity-building for volunteers as well as host institutions and link projects with cross-cutting development goals. For example, the mainstreaming of gender awareness programmes and civic participation initiatives can ensure that broader goals are achieved across volunteer initiatives.

The importance of tailoring training towards the specific needs of vulnerable groups is referenced in the Philippines NDP 2023–2028, which endorses the role of local governments in raising the capacity of community volunteers to become frontliners in disaster response, “especially for the vulnerable groups and those located in far-flung areas”.¹⁹⁴ Training for volunteering programmes is linked to increased confidence and levels of proficiency (e.g., among Specialized Disability Support and Elderly Support volunteers in Thailand).¹⁹⁵

United Nations Country Team reporting documents demonstrate a rich and diversified culture of investment in skills training that intersects with many volunteering initiatives. The Timor-Leste UNSDCF 2021–2025 recognizes the need to tailor training courses to reflect “the different challenges and skills needs of different groups of the population, with a strong focus on the most marginalized”.¹⁹⁶ Work-oriented and entrepreneurship capacity-building programmes are well-developed and widespread, mentioned in UNSDCFs across the world. For example, the need for United Nations teams to build competencies that meet labour-market demand for women, vulnerable groups and persons with disabilities are cited as key areas of capacity development in the Mongolia UNSDCF 2023–2027 and Uzbekistan UNSDCF 2021–2025.¹⁹⁷

Gender empowerment and environmental awareness training are key areas of knowledge transfer related to SDGs even when these are not the main focus of a programme. In Egypt, United Nations teams aim to strengthen community volunteers for building resilience to climate change risks and shocks.¹⁹⁸ Capacity-building for civic engagement is also increasingly a cross-cutting aim of volunteer programmes. For example, increasing the ability of youth and women to lead, influence, implement and expand the reach of effective community engagement is a stated aim of United Nations programmes in Sri Lanka.¹⁹⁹ In Kazakhstan, efforts are directed towards strengthening the capacity of volunteers to engage in monitoring SDG implementation as a way of addressing the challenges faced by vulnerable groups.²⁰⁰

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments and United Nations agencies can promote LNOB by ensuring that volunteer programmes consistently:

- include and report on capacity-building, tailoring it towards the specific needs of vulnerable groups
- maintain high standards in the delivery of skills training content and meet the long-term needs of volunteers, including their need to generate income
- design capacity-building strategies that recognize the costs of participation to volunteers in time and resources
- integrate gender empowerment, environmental awareness and civic engagement efforts across capacity-building strategies

Well-resourced implementation: Investment in infrastructure

To enable volunteering to flourish and meet the needs of marginalized people, governments must join with donors, private sector entities and other financing institutions. Creating an enabling environment for volunteering to flourish and meet the needs of marginalized populations requires significant investment. Governments – in partnership with donors, private sector entities and other financing institutions – must allocate portions of their national budgets to this objective. Budgeting for programming, training, equipment and infrastructure to support volunteering is essential.²⁰¹ When the issue of financing is considered in synergy with the LNOB mandate, three considerations emerge.

The first consideration regards a shift in how investment in volunteering is framed. Deploying funding towards capacity-building, training and infrastructure that ensures the safety and well-being of volunteers can address the risk that volunteer work is treated simply as a source of cheap labour. Investments in volunteer infrastructure signal a rejection of the common assumption that volunteers can compensate for reductions in public spending.²⁰² The Thailand VNR 2021 illustrates this type of proactive approach to investing in volunteers by listing the necessary technical support for volunteering in disaster response

interventions, including the transfer of “technology, equipment and tools, the provision of experts and volunteers, development of basic infrastructure, and the development of human resources through trainings and scholarships”.²⁰³

The second consideration regards allocating funding to support volunteering in national and local government budget planning. This funding can facilitate strategies that promote sustainable local volunteer engagement in order to prioritize people on the margins. The Mongolia VNR 2023 endorses this approach; that VNR states: “[C]oncrete actions are implemented to combat inequalities and discrimination and identify vulnerable groups so that they can fully participate in development efforts. This requires collaboration between the Government and Technical and Financial Partners, as well as all development stakeholders in the formulation and financing of actions and the targeting of people who may be left behind.”²⁰⁴ Specific funding streams can also be deployed to support the participation and inclusion of disadvantaged or discriminated populations, as in the case of a microgrant scheme in Slovakia for community volunteering projects.²⁰⁵

A third step towards funding that directs volunteering towards the holistic realization of LNOB involves participatory forms of budgeting. At the local level, for example, local organizations and volunteers can participate in participatory budgeting exercises in which local groups pitch ideas for small-scale volunteering initiatives to their peers.²⁰⁶ In the context of LNOB, the issue of volunteer remuneration in development and humanitarian contexts requires focused debate and participatory input in each local context to ensure that local and international volunteer involving organizations identify strategies to ameliorate the potential negative impacts of unequal patterns of remuneration.²⁰⁷

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments and United Nations agencies, can promote LNOB by ensuring that:

- national and local budget planning cycles explicitly include volunteering and prioritize the needs of harder-to-reach groups
- resources are mobilized to ensure volunteer safety, security and well-being
- public spending welfare and service provisions enable and support volunteer contributions
- fair and transparent guidelines for remuneration are developed that can be adapted to each context, with the overall goal of realizing LNOB

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