

Barriers and Benefits to the Practice of Volunteering by People With Disabilities: A Study of the Perceptions of Organisations Working With Disabilities

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Abstract: The practice of volunteering has been associated with several benefits for the population as a whole, as well as for specific population groups. In the case of people with disabilities (PwD), there is an unsolved paradox. On the one hand, volunteering is a powerful tool for capabilities development and social integration. On the other hand, few PwD are volunteers. Based on this paradox, the paper has three main objectives. Firstly to analyse the position of organisations that work directly with PwD towards inclusive volunteering. Secondly, to assess the benefits that organisations on the field ascribe to the practice of volunteering by PwD and thirdly to examine the factors perceived by organisations as obstacles to the practice of volunteering by PwD, and secondly to. Primary data was collected through a questionnaire sent to organisations that work directly with people with disabilities in Portugal as part of their mission. The data was collected between 28 June and 6 October 2024. A total of 104 valid responses were received and analysed. The results show that organisations recognise that volunteering is under-utilised and that there are still several barriers. The main ones are the lack of opportunities for inclusive volunteering, the lack of support staff and the lack of encouragement from family members. Nevertheless, the organisations recognise the high benefits associated with volunteering by people with disabilities, with particular emphasis on access to new experiences for people with disabilities, the fact that it allows people with disabilities to feel more fulfilled and useful, and the potential in terms of exercising citizenship. Other benefits include the ability of volunteering to reduce stigma towards people with disabilities, promote socialisation, develop skills and contribute to building inclusive communities.

Keywords: People with disabilities, Inclusive volunteering, Perceived benefits, Barriers

1. Introduction

Inclusive volunteering remains a relatively underexplored and under-researched field, especially in Portugal. Despite its growing importance, few empirical studies have addressed this critical area. At a time when organisations seek greater resilience and sustainability, inclusive volunteering offers a transformative tool that promotes diversity, engagement, and stronger community ties, thereby enhancing the social impact of these organisations.

The theoretical framework of this paper conceptualizes inclusive volunteering as a multifaceted and strategic pathway to civic engagement, particularly for marginalized groups such as PwD. Drawing on contemporary literature and policy frameworks, the paper focuses on three dimensions: the role of volunteering in fostering civic participation among historically excluded populations; the specific benefits and barriers experienced by PwD in volunteer contexts; and the critical function of social economy organisations in enabling inclusive, transformative volunteering experiences. Emphasizing a shift from deficit-based to rights-based models of disability, this framework highlights how inclusive volunteering not only addresses structural inequalities but also redefines social roles and collective responsibilities. Despite persistent institutional and attitudinal challenges, inclusive volunteering emerges as a promising avenue for enhancing agency, promoting social justice, and building more equitable and participatory civic spaces. Although the potential to inclusive volunteer can offer, it is still observed a very reduced participation and that volunteering rates considerably lower than the observed in the general population (Li et al., 2018; Marková, 2020). Inclusive volunteering represents a valuable tool that organizations working with persons with disabilities (PwD) can leverage as part of their intervention strategies with this target group. However, studies on the use of volunteering by such organisations are scarce, particularly in Portugal. Based on this gap, our research question is what are the current perception of organisations regarding the use of inclusive volunteering?

Taking these research questions into consideration, three research objectives are defined, namely to study: (i) the position of organisations towards inclusive volunteering; and (ii) the benefits and barriers they associate with this type of volunteering.

To investigate these dynamics, this study employed a quantitative methodology targeting organisations that work directly with PwD. Data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed among relevant Portuguese organizations, yielding 104 valid responses that were subsequently analysed using IBM SPSS software.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 1 provides an overview of the theoretical background to inclusive volunteering. Section 2 focuses on the legal framework and practice of inclusive volunteering. Section 3 presents the methodology. Section 4 presents the results obtained in the research. Finally, the main conclusions are outlined.

2. Inclusive Volunteering in Theory and Practice

2.1 Volunteering as a Catalyst for Civic Participation among Minority Groups

Volunteering is commonly understood as a voluntary act carried out without financial gain, often for the benefit of individuals or the broader community (Scheier, 1980; Andronic, 2014). It has evolved beyond charitable connotations and is now recognized as a strategic tool for fostering community participation, personal development, and active citizenship (GHK, 2010; Council of the EU, 2011). Although legal definitions vary across countries, the underlying principles highlight volunteering as an act of free will, oriented towards public good, and often characterized by mutual benefit for both volunteers and recipients (Licandro et al., 2021).

Volunteering is increasingly acknowledged in the literature as a powerful mechanism to support social inclusion, especially for individuals and groups with historically low levels of civic engagement. Participation in volunteer activities has been associated with numerous psychological and social benefits, including enhanced self-esteem, improved mental and physical health, greater social integration, and the development of new skills and identities (Smith, 1997; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Marková, 2019).

Particularly for groups such as older adults, unemployed individuals, and people with mental health conditions or disabilities, volunteering has been shown to offer a route back into community engagement and to mitigate the effects of social exclusion (Binder, 2015; Rebeiro & Allen, 1998; Wang et al., 2022). According to Musick and Wilson (2003), the psychological and social benefits derived from volunteering can vary across age and demographic groups but consistently indicate its potential to support life satisfaction and social (re)integration.

From a policy perspective, volunteering is increasingly seen as a mechanism to democratize civic participation and promote occupational and social justice (Townsend & Whiteford, 2005). This is particularly salient in the context of social economy organisations, which often adopt volunteering not only as a form of service delivery but also as a transformative process that empowers marginalized individuals to participate actively in society.

2.2 Volunteering and Disability: Inclusion, Benefits, and Barriers

Inclusive volunteering refers to the engagement of all individuals in volunteer activities, recognizing and valuing the unique contributions of each person, including those with disabilities (Miller et al., 2010). The concept aligns with the social and human rights models of disability, which emphasize participation, agency, and the dismantling of structural barriers (Fontes & Martins, 2023; Lawson & Beckett, 2021).

Research indicates that PwD derive numerous personal and social benefits from volunteering. These include exposure to new experiences, improved social connections, skill acquisition, greater autonomy, enhanced self-confidence, and the development of a positive social identity (Marková, 2019; Kulik, 2018; Rebeiro & Allen, 1998). Volunteering also facilitates access to broader opportunities, such as employment, education, and community engagement, contributing to behavioural change and increased societal participation (Miller et al., 2010; Marková, 2019).

Organisations implementing inclusive volunteering programs also report organisational benefits, including increased operational efficiency and the reduction of stigma and prejudice toward people with disabilities (Choma & Ochocka, 2006; Miller et al., 2010). These findings highlight the mutual value of inclusive volunteering and advocate for its wider adoption.

Despite its benefits, PwD remain underrepresented in volunteer roles. A wide range of barriers contributes to this exclusion, including physical inaccessibility, lack of adaptive volunteer roles, limited transportation options, and ableist attitudes within organisations (Miller et al., 2003; Choma & Ochocka, 2006). Institutional structures

often lack the flexibility and resources necessary to support volunteers with functional diversity, and exclusionary practices remain prevalent.

Moreover, the language and conceptual framing of disability within public discourse can itself serve as a barrier to inclusion. Historically rooted in medical and administrative models (Stone, 1984; Marks, 1997), disability has been framed in ways that emphasize deficit rather than potential. The persistence of these paradigms contributes to the marginalization of people with disabilities in civic life, including volunteering.

Portuguese public policy, while increasingly aligned with the human rights model of disability, still reflects this tension. Although the National Strategy for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities (ENIPD 2021-2025) promotes inclusive volunteering, the absence of a clear definition and actionable framework limits its effectiveness. Furthermore, existing legislation often frames people with disabilities primarily as recipients of volunteer work rather than as active agents.

2.3 Volunteering as a Tool for Organisational Social Intervention

Social economy organisations have long recognized the value of volunteering as a means of social intervention. In this context, volunteering is not only a support mechanism for beneficiaries but also a tool for empowerment and transformation for the volunteers themselves (Townsend & Whiteford, 2005). This is particularly evident in programs that engage PwD or histories of institutionalization, where volunteering facilitates social reintegration and contributes to broader goals of inclusion and justice.

These organisations often act as mediators between volunteers with functional diversity and the broader community, developing partnerships with advocacy groups, adapting volunteer roles, and training staff to support diverse needs (Miller et al., 2010). Successful programs emphasize the importance of support networks, including families, friends, and peers, as well as the active involvement of PwD in the design and implementation of volunteer activities.

Inclusive volunteering thus emerges as both a symbol and a mechanism of societal transformation. It challenges traditional paradigms of dependency and positions people with disabilities as contributors and agents of change. By creating accessible, flexible, and meaningful opportunities for participation, organisations play a critical role in restructuring civic life and promoting social equity.

3. Inclusive Volunteering in Portugal: Legal Framework, Practice, and Gaps

3.1 Legal Framework for Volunteering in Portugal

Law No. 71/98 of 3 November establishes the legal framework for volunteering in Portugal. It defines volunteering as a set of organized, unpaid activities carried out for the benefit of individuals, communities, or society at large, grounded in values of solidarity and civic participation. These activities must be undertaken within public or private nonprofit organisations and align with their mission and objectives.

The law outlines several core components:

- Scope of application: the law applies exclusively to formal volunteering, explicitly excluding informal acts of solidarity among family members, friends, or neighbours.
- Volunteer Rights and Duties: Volunteers are entitled to be informed, trained, and supported in their roles. They are also obligated to act responsibly, respect organisational values, and maintain confidentiality where applicable.
- Host organisations: eligible host entities must be legally constituted, nonprofit in nature, and capable of supporting, supervising, and integrating volunteers within their operational structures.
- Strategic planning: a central requirement is the creation of a Volunteer Plan, a document that systematizes the integration of volunteers within the organisation.
- Principles and values: the law emphasizes adherence to fundamental principles such as human dignity, solidarity, non-discrimination, and active citizenship.

Despite its comprehensive structure, the law remains silent on critical aspects related to inclusion, accessibility, and equity. Specifically, it contains no reference to disability or to mechanisms for accommodating individuals with functional diversity. Nor does it provide guidance on how host organisations might identify and address barriers to participation or implement inclusive practices.

This absence reflects a significant gap in the legal framework, particularly considering evolving national and international commitments to social inclusion, diversity, and equal opportunity. Without explicit provisions for

inclusive volunteering, the law may inadvertently contribute to the marginalization of underrepresented groups within the national volunteering ecosystem.

3.2 Volunteering Trends and Organisational Practices in Portugal

According to a 2022 Eurobarometer report, Portugal continues to trail behind other EU member states in terms of volunteering participation. This low engagement occurs within a context where volunteering is legally framed in narrow terms. Law No. 71/98 of 3 November applies exclusively to formal/institutional volunteering, explicitly excluding informal acts of solidarity carried out among family members, friends, or neighbours. Formal volunteering is defined as unpaid participation within legally constituted organisations, guided by the mission and values of the host entity and distinct from spontaneous or informal forms of civic engagement (Choi et al., 2007).

So, in Portugal formal volunteering remains the most prevalent form of civic engagement. According to the most recent Voluntary Work Survey (INE) in 2018, approximately 7.8% of the resident population aged 15 or older participated in at least one formal or informal volunteering activity. Of this group, 6.4% were involved in formal volunteering, while only 1.5% engaged in informal volunteering.

This distribution contrasts with global patterns, where informal volunteering tends to be more prevalent. According to data from United Nations Volunteers (UNV, 2022), 14.3% of working-age individuals globally engage in informal volunteering, compared to 6.5% in formal volunteering. These figures suggest that, in Portugal, the institutionalized nature of volunteering - as established in the legal framework - may influence the relatively lower prevalence of informal civic contributions.

The profile of formal volunteers in Portugal is relatively specific. The majority are younger, unemployed individuals with higher levels of education, and they are more frequently women and single (INE, 2018). The tasks performed tend to align with those of technicians and mid-level professionals, reflecting a relatively high level of responsibility and specialization within formal volunteering settings.

Notably absent from the national volunteering survey are references to inclusion or disability. This omission represents a significant data gap and prevents a comprehensive understanding of the extent to which PwD participate in volunteering, under what conditions, and with what experiences. Without this information, it is difficult to evaluate the inclusivity of the current volunteering ecosystem or to identify areas for improvement in promoting more equitable access.

Volunteer-promoting organisations in Portugal play a crucial role in mobilizing civic engagement and responding to social needs. These organisations encompass a diverse range of actors, including social economy organisations, religious bodies, and public sector entities such as municipalities. Research two central roles within the volunteering ecosystem: i) promoters - organisations that recruit, train, and integrate volunteers; ii) and facilitators - intermediary bodies, such as the Local Volunteer Banks, that connect volunteers with relevant opportunities (IPDJ, 2021; ISCTE, 2020).

While many organizations offer structured volunteer programs with training, insurance, and certification, smaller local associations often rely on informal approaches due to limited resources. A 2021 Volunteering Observatory study found that over 70% of Portuguese organizations lack dedicated volunteer coordination, undermining effective management across recruitment, onboarding, supervision, and retention.

Age-related trends in volunteering highlight sustainability concerns. Most organized programs in Portugal attract individuals aged 55 and above, while youth participation remains low (ISCTE, 2020). To address this, the National Youth Council (CNJ, 2023) recommends adapting volunteering to younger generations through flexible, short-term, and digital formats like micro-volunteering and online engagement.

Despite the positive impact of volunteering initiatives, organisations across the country face persistent and multifaceted challenges. A lack of sustainable funding continues to be a critical issue, with many organisations dependent on short-term grants or irregular public financing. This financial instability limits their ability to maintain consistent infrastructure, training programs, and volunteer oversight. Additionally, the professionalization of volunteer management remains underdeveloped; few organisations have staff trained specifically in coordinating volunteer efforts, leading to inefficiencies and limited capacity for systematic evaluation of program impact.

Legal and bureaucratic complexities further constrain organisational effectiveness. Although Law no. 71/98 provides a foundational legal framework for volunteering, many organisations report difficulties in interpreting

and applying certain provisions, particularly those related to insurance, reimbursement of expenses, and the nature of volunteer contracts. These uncertainties can hinder the development of robust volunteer programs and discourage participation.

Overall, while the Portuguese volunteering landscape is supported by a broad and diverse network of organisations, it operates in a context marked by financial constraints, low professionalization, regulatory ambiguity, and shifting societal expectations. These structural limitations must be addressed through coordinated public policies, institutional innovation, and greater collaboration between civil society, educational institutions, and government agencies.

3.3 The Absence and Potential of Inclusive Volunteering in Portugal

The lack of a robust Portuguese legal framework and the absence of data that considers the experiences of traditionally excluded groups - particularly PwD - highlight a critical gap in the development of inclusive volunteering in Portugal. The concept of inclusive volunteering responds to this gap by recognizing the potential of individuals who are often not perceived as active agents within their communities. It challenges normative assumptions about who can contribute through volunteer work and calls attention to systemic exclusions within formal volunteering structures.

PwD remain underrepresented in volunteering due to structural and attitudinal barriers—such as limited organizational acceptance, inaccessible infrastructure, and a lack of individualized support (Choma & Ochocka, 2006; Graff & Vedell, 2003). This exclusion denies PwD the social, psychological, and practical benefits of volunteering, including skill development, community integration, and access to broader participation opportunities (Miller et al., 2003; Marková, 2019).

Recent scholarship calls for a shift from viewing marginalized groups as passive recipients to recognizing them as active contributors in volunteering. While early studies focused on intellectual and developmental disabilities, later research—including participant-centred work by Marková (2019)—has highlighted the diverse benefits PwD gain from volunteering, such as autonomy, well-being, and strengthened identity.

Inclusive initiatives like the RGSV Supported Volunteering Program demonstrate these benefits, showing improved confidence, self-esteem (Kulik, 2018), and responsibility among PwD (Choma & Ochocka, 2006). Host organizations also benefit through increased efficiency and reduced stigma (Miller & Schleen, 2010).

Despite growing international evidence, inclusive volunteering remains underexplored in Portugal. This study addresses that gap by examining how professionals working with PwD perceive inclusive volunteering, aiming to inform local practices and broader policy development.

4. Methodology

This study has three main objectives. Firstly, to examine the position that organisations that accompany PwD have towards inclusive volunteering, secondly to analyse the factors perceived as obstacles to the practice of volunteering and, thirdly, to assess the benefits that organisations on the field ascribe to the practice of volunteering by PwD.

Given the nature of the research objectives, quantitative methodology was used, with organisations working directly with people with functional diversity as units of analysis. Primary data was collected through an online questionnaire.

The questionnaire included three groups of questions. The first group was aimed at assessing respondents' general position regarding volunteering. The second group comprised questions designed to analyse the perceived benefits of volunteering. The third group of questions aimed to evaluate the extent to which various factors were considered barriers to volunteering by people with disabilities.

The questionnaire was built by researchers, based on research objectives and existing literature, and with a particular focus on the report 'Recommendations for Public Policies: More Inclusive Volunteering', which was prepared as part of the VolunTalento project.

The data collection process took place between 28 June and 6 October 2023. The questionnaires were distributed through the networks and email contacts of the organisations involved in the topic in Portugal. During this period a total of 104 valid responses were received. After that, the quantitative data collected was analysed using the IBM SPSS Software.

4.1 Sample

The surveyed organisations are distributed across the country, with the highest concentration in the north (35.6%), followed by the Setúbal Peninsula (19.2%) and the central region (18.3%). Most organisations are based in urban areas (69.2%) and primarily operate at the local (43.3%) or regional (26.9%) level.

Regarding size, most organisations have fewer than 100 employees, with notable proportions having teams of 10 to 49 employees (22.1%) and 50 to 99 employees (20.2%). Only a small fraction (5.8%) employs more than 250 staff. In terms of the number of users served by the organisations, there are organisations with more than 250 users (33.7%) and smaller organisations with 10 to 49 users (19.2%).

5. Findings

5.1 Positioning Towards Inclusive Volunteering

The results obtained show that most of the organisations surveyed (74%) involve PwD in the development of volunteering activities. However, a large proportion of these organisations (35.6%) only involve between 1 and 3 people with functional diversity in volunteering, while the percentage of organisations with more than 15 users with functional diversity in volunteering is only 11.5%. In addition, 26% of the respondents said that they did not have any users who were involved in volunteering.

Table 1: Organisation's overall perception of the practice of inclusive volunteering

Question	n	%
PwD who are supported by the organisation and who have already been involved in volunteering		
None	27	26,0
Between 1 and 3	37	35,6
Between 4 and 7	19	18,3
Between 8 and 15	9	8,7
More than 15	12	11,5
Occurrence of volunteering in the lives of people with functional diversity whom the organisation supports		
The opportunity to volunteer has been made available by the organisation	62	59,6
Volunteering is a result of the individual's own initiative	30	28,8
Volunteering was recommended by family members	10	9,6
Volunteering was recommended by friends	3	2,9
The organisation offers volunteer activities to the PwD it supports		
Not usually	28	26,9
Very occasionally	45	43,3
Very regularly	14	13,5
It is part of the accompaniment strategy of the organisation	17	16,3
Typical PwD reaction when presented with a volunteer proposal		
They usually reject the proposal immediately	1	1,0
They usually listen, are not very open to the proposal and reject it	10	9,6
They usually listen, are not very open to the proposal but accept it	24	23,1
They enthusiastically accept the offer to volunteer	40	38,5
Reasons for not proposing volunteering activities to PwD		
Lack of synergy with local organisations	6	5,8
Lack of human resources that can be allocated to this specific task.	16	15,4
Lack of knowledge about how to do it in an organised way	6	5,8
Poor adherence to PwD support networks	6	5,8
Have contact with organisations that can provide inclusive volunteering opportunities		

Question	n	%
No	40	38,5
Yes, but not enough	54	51,9
Yes, several contacts	10	9,6

Source: Own elaboration

For the individuals who do volunteer work, the volunteering activity is in most of the cases the result of opportunities provided by the organisations that support PwD (59.6%), followed by the own initiative of the PwD (28.8%). Recommendations from family members (9.6%) and friends (2.9%) were less common.

Most organisations (73.1%) indicate that they suggest some form of volunteering to the PwD they work with. However, this suggestion is usually made on an occasional basis (43.3%), while it is less common for it to be made on a regular basis (13.5%) or as part of a strategy to support the users (16.3%).

When the organisation suggests a volunteering proposal to their beneficiaries with functional diversity, they typically accept the offer with enthusiasm (38.5%). In addition, 23.1% say that despite initial reluctance, users accept the proposal. In contrast, 10.6% say that proposals are generally rejected, after a short analysis (9.6%) or immediately after receiving the proposal (1%).

The main reason why organisations do not offer voluntary activities to people with disabilities is the lack of human resources (15.4%). Other reasons given by some organisations (only 5.8%) are the lack of synergies with local organisations, the lack of knowledge of how to proceed or the poor adherence of the network that supports PwDF

It should be noted that the responding organisations consider their contacts with institutions that host inclusive volunteering as quite limited. Indeed, 38.5% of the organisations said that they had no contacts and 51.9% said that they had contacts but that they were insufficient. Only 9.6% of the organisations said that they had many contacts with entities offering opportunities for inclusive volunteering.

After that, we have analysed the propensity of organisations to develop inclusive volunteering in the future.

The results obtained show that most organisations are very likely to engage in volunteering in the future, whether in the short, medium or long term. However, the longer the time horizon, the more likely organisations are to engage in volunteering.

In the short term (up to one year), 32.7% of organisations say that they are unlikely or very unlikely to offer volunteering opportunities to the PwD they support. This percentage drops to 19.2% if the period analysed is between 1 and 3 years and to only 14.4% if the horizon is between 3 and 5 years.

5.2 Perceived Benefits From Volunteering

Organisations recognise several benefits associated with volunteering by PwD (Table 2). Firstly, respondents highlight the access to new experiences for PwD, a benefit which 92.3% of organisations agreed or strongly agreed. In addition, volunteering is seen as a way for PwD to feel more fulfilled and useful, with an average score of 4.6 on a 5-point scale, as well to enhance the exercise of citizenship, also with an average score of 4.6.

Other benefits strongly valued by organisations include the ability of volunteering to reduce stigma towards PwD, to promote socialisation, to develop skills and to contribute to building inclusive communities, all with an average score of 4.5.

On the other hand, organisations rate the benefits of volunteering in terms of access to new job opportunities more moderately. While 68.3% of organisations agree or strongly agree with the potential it offers in this area, 14.4% disagree or strongly disagree. In addition, 9.6% of organisations disagreed with the benefits of inclusive volunteering in terms of overcoming barriers and inspiring other PwD.

Table 2: Benefits related to volunteering

Benefits	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Promote the socialisation of PwD	1	1	7,7	26,9	63,5	4,51
Develop competences for PwD	1	0	9,6	28,8	60,6	4,48
Access to new experiences for PwD	1	0	6,7	23,1	69,2	4,6

Benefits	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Access to new job opportunities for PwD	1,9	12,5	17,3	25	43,3	3,95
Increase self-confidence of PwD	1	0	6,7	31,7	60,6	4,51
Make PwD feel more fulfilled and useful	1	1	6,7	24	67,3	4,56
Reduce PwD' feelings of loneliness or exclusion	1	2,9	9,6	26	60,6	4,42
Provide an example of overcoming obstacles and an inspiration to other PwD	3,8	5,8	10,6	27,9	51,9	4,18
Increase the respect that PwD volunteers can gain from their peers	1	1,9	10,6	30,8	55,8	4,38
Encourage the exercise of citizenship	1	0	6,7	27,9	64,4	4,55
Empower people in vulnerable situations	1	1,9	10,6	26,9	59,6	4,42
Build resilience and social cohesion in the community	1	1	15,4	27,9	54,8	4,35
Reduce the stigma towards PwD	1	1	8,7	24	65,4	4,52
Build inclusive communities	1	0	9,6	27,9	61,5	4,49
Access to a greater number of volunteers/collaborators (PwD and non-PwD)	1	1	15,4	26	56,7	4,37

Note: 1 corresponds to totally disagree and 5 to totally agree.

Source: Own elaboration

5.3 Barriers to the Practice of Volunteering

When analysing the barriers identified by organisations to the practice of volunteering by PwD (Table 3). The most widely recognised barrier is the perception that there are few opportunities for inclusive volunteering, with 73.7% of organisations agreeing or strongly agreeing (mean score of 4 out of 5). This was followed by a lack of support staff (mean score 3.7) and a lack of encouragement from family members (mean score 3).

On the other hand, organisations do not consider the fear of PwD about their ability to perform or the discomfort of people around them to be significant barriers, with mean scores of 3 and 2.7 respectively.

Table 3: Barriers to the practice of inclusive volunteering by organisations

Barriers	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
It is difficult for PwD to volunteer because of the lack of support staff.	3	7,1	32,3	36,4	21,2	3,7
People with disabilities don't have the opportunity to volunteer because it takes a lot of time and other resources that they don't have.	9,1	21,2	34,3	26,6	9,1	3,1
The people who are responsible for managing and accompanying the volunteers are not aware of the needs of people with disabilities.	5,1	24,2	23,2	36,4	11,1	3,2
A lack of accessibility to the places where the volunteer work is carried out.	6,1	16,2	42,4	24,2	11,1	3,2
More PwD don't volunteer because they are afraid that they won't be able to.	5,1	26,3	36,4	27,3	5,1	3,0
More PwD don't volunteer because they are afraid of making other people feel uncomfortable.	8,1	36,4	35,4	17,2	3	2,7
More PwD don't volunteer because family members don't encourage it.	4	9,1	31,3	43,4	12,1	3,5
There aren't more PwD volunteering because there are not many opportunities.	2	5,1	19,2	41,4	32,3	4,0

Note: 1 corresponds to totally disagree and 5 to totally agree.

Source: Own elaboration

6. Final Remarks

Building on both international and national studies, this paper advocates for a paradigm shift toward inclusive volunteering. It explores barriers and benefits associated with the involvement of individuals with functional diversity as active contributors rather than passive beneficiaries. Inclusive volunteering offers significant personal, organisational, and societal benefits, including greater autonomy, skill development, and reduced stigma. The findings underscore an urgent need for policy reform, inclusive program design, and stronger intersectoral collaboration to cultivate a more equitable and impactful volunteering landscape in Portugal.

This study sheds light on the complex landscape of inclusive volunteering in Portugal, revealing both significant progress and persistent challenges. While most organisations engage people with functional diversity in volunteering activities, participation remains limited in scale and scope. The findings underscore the crucial role of organisations in creating opportunities and fostering enthusiasm among volunteers with disabilities. However, structural barriers such as limited inclusive opportunities, insufficient support staff, and weak family encouragement continue to constrain broader participation.

The findings present a nuanced portrait of inclusive volunteering in Portugal. While most organisations (74%) involve PwD in volunteering activities, participation is generally limited in scale, with many engaging only a small number of volunteers with disabilities. These volunteering opportunities are primarily provided through the organisations supporting PwD, with participants showing enthusiasm and willingness to engage. Nonetheless, many organisations report limited or insufficient connections with entities offering inclusive volunteering, highlighting structural gaps within the ecosystem. Encouragingly, most organisations express intent to expand inclusive volunteering in the future, especially over longer timeframes. Recognized benefits include access to new experiences, enhanced personal fulfilment, skill development, socialization, and community inclusion. However, the role of volunteering as a pathway to employment is viewed more cautiously. The main barriers identified are the scarcity of inclusive opportunities, insufficient support staff, and limited encouragement from family members, while concerns about volunteers' capacity or social discomfort appear less significant. These findings emphasize the need for targeted strategies to foster more accessible, supported, and sustainable inclusive volunteering practices. Despite these challenges, the clear recognition of numerous personal and social benefits - ranging from skill development and social inclusion to reduced stigma - affirms the transformative potential of inclusive volunteering. The expressed willingness of organisations to expand these opportunities over time is an encouraging sign for the future.

The results could have important practical implications. A more holistic approach should be adopted by those responsible for these organisations, in cooperation with a range of stakeholders performing different roles in the process. Of particular note here is interaction with individuals close to PwD in the context of volunteering, namely family members, where involvement and awareness-raising initiatives would be especially valuable. Furthermore, close cooperation with other institutions capable of fostering and offering inclusive volunteering opportunities in which their target audience can participate would maximise the benefits of inclusive volunteering.

To realize the full promise of inclusive volunteering, strategic efforts are needed at multiple levels. Policymakers must address legal and regulatory gaps that exclude or marginalize PwD from formal volunteering frameworks. Organisations should invest in capacity-building, intersectoral collaboration, and proactive outreach to both potential volunteers and their support networks. Moreover, ongoing research is essential to deepen understanding of best practices, monitor progress, and amplify the voices of volunteers with functional diversity themselves.

Ultimately, fostering an inclusive volunteering ecosystem is not only a matter of social justice but also a pathway to more resilient, dynamic, and equitable communities. By embracing the contributions of people with functional diversity as active agents of change, society can move closer to realizing the ideals of citizenship, participation, and belonging for all.

Ethics declaration: Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Data were collected anonymously, and no identifying information was collected or stored, and data were used exclusively for research purposes. All data were securely stored in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and institutional data protection policies.

AI declaration: AI tools were used exclusively for language revision and editing purposes during the preparation of this manuscript. No AI tools were employed in the design, execution, or analysis of the quantitative data, including the content analysis of the questionnaires.

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