

Overview

INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING: TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Purpose and Scope

Almost seventy per cent of all volunteering is direct and informal, yet this form of work remains under researched and poorly understood (UNV 2018, 2026). The meaning of the term “informal volunteering” is not intuitive and many people doing this work do not consider themselves to be volunteers. Nevertheless, given its magnitude and contribution, it is important to pay attention to this activity.

Informal volunteer work encompasses primarily activities which are undertaken directly, that is organized and carried out person-to-person, but some informal volunteer work is undertaken through registered or unregistered organizations. Direct informal volunteer work is by far the most common form of informal volunteer work, it is also the least well understood. This is due to challenges in visibility, definitions, methods and priorities. Insufficient data impacts how well we understand its forms, functions, benefits and challenges.

In response to these knowledge and evidence gaps, direct informal volunteer work is the focus of the *Informal Volunteering: Trends and Characteristics*. It comprises a literature review combined with findings on informal volunteering from an eight-country

survey on volunteer work commissioned by United Nations Volunteers (UNV) between March and May 2025. The countries surveyed were Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda.

Characteristics of Direct Informal Volunteers

Levels of informal and formal volunteer work vary considerably between countries. Descriptive statistics on overall volunteering rates range from below 30 to nearly 80 per cent among the eight countries surveyed here. Overall, volunteering rates reduce with age, driven by the fall in direct informal volunteering. Younger and older direct informal volunteers spend more time volunteering informally than prime age adults, especially among men.

Gender alone does not significantly influence overall engagement in volunteer work. However, the intersection of gender with other demographic characteristics plays a crucial role in shaping volunteering patterns. Women tend to volunteer less when they are engaged in unpaid care within their homes or when they are living with disabilities. Furthermore, women with lower levels of education

are statistically significantly more likely than their male counterparts to participate in direct informal volunteer work.

Women and men with higher education levels or higher economic status are more likely to volunteer compared to their less-educated or less-advantaged counterparts. Moreover, men who are still in education are more likely to engage in formal volunteer work rather than direct informal volunteer work. In contrast, younger and older men tend to dedicate more time to direct informal volunteer work, while men in the 25-44 age group participate less in this type of volunteering.

Family income has a weaker and more varied relationship with direct informal volunteer work than formal volunteer work. In some countries informal volunteer work increases with family income while in others it falls and in yet others there is no obvious relationship. Being out of work does influence direct informal volunteer work, as people whose primary activity is seeking work and retired women rank among those most likely to be engaged in informal volunteer work.

Other important factors influencing volunteer work include disability and location. People with disabilities or long-term illnesses have the lowest rates of engagement in direct informal volunteer work. Meanwhile, the impact of living in rural areas versus urban areas on direct informal volunteer work varies significantly across countries. There is an almost 20 percentage point difference in China between rural and urban areas, yet no significant difference in Nigeria.

Drivers and Impacts of Direct Informal Volunteer Work

The UNV survey and literature review found that while direct informal volunteer work is primarily about reciprocal support provided by members of a community (“getting by”), formal volunteer work is more likely to also involve some element of personal advancement (“getting on”). Skills development and improved employment prospects are less of a motivation among direct informal volunteers.

Meeting needs is an important driver of direct informal and formal volunteer work alike. Direct informal volunteer work, typically from within a community or network, benefits from responsiveness and availability which may be harder to achieve with some forms of organization-based volunteering. Informal volunteering can also reinforce social cohesion. Such volunteering can be particularly needed where state services and social protection are limited.

The literature review found that direct informal volunteering is characterized by a short “psychological distance” between the volunteer and the so-called beneficiaries. As such, informal volunteers often see the impact of their work first-hand. Furthermore, because informal volunteering is usually interpersonal and is not mediated by any structures, the volunteer typically retains their sense of agency.

Some forms of direct informal volunteer work are associated with reciprocity, solidarity and mutuality. This volunteer work is rooted in social connectivity and may be associated with an agenda for change.

Looking Ahead

Going forward, several interventions could be instrumental in better understanding and supporting direct informal volunteer work. Diverse agencies can play a role in progressing this agenda, including universities (especially in the Global South), governments (including statistical offices, policymakers and ministries), United Nations entities and volunteer organizations. Importantly, direct informal volunteers must be equitably involved in these efforts so that research and support are well-aligned with their experiences, understandings and needs.

Key opportunities for stakeholders to further understand and recognize informal volunteers include:

- ▶▶ **National statistical offices: develop and use nationally appropriate and context-specific questions to measure informal volunteering.** Data collection using labour-force surveys and time use surveys, which allow disaggregation by gender, age, race, disability, location and income, as well as by activity type, could deepen and broaden the understanding of direct informal volunteer work.
- ▶▶ **Local, regional and national policymakers: work towards appropriately recognizing direct informal volunteer work as a legitimate form of civic engagement.** This requires greater attention to be paid to informal volunteering within wider conversations about volunteering, alongside work to develop strong

legal definitions of informal volunteering. Together, this can help to create an enabling environment to strengthen and support this form of unpaid work. Direct informal volunteer work can be included within national volunteer strategies, work policies and other policies. Community ownership of informal volunteer work should be protected, while avoiding relying upon volunteers to substitute for public services.

- ▶▶ **Ministries of education, training and work: recognize the importance of direct informal volunteer work as a form of learning and work experience.** This valuing of informal volunteer work is already taking place in countries including Bahrain, Germany, Ireland, Lebanon and Türkiye.
- ▶▶ **Academia and researchers: to be enabled and supported to research informal volunteers' experiences in middle- and lower-income countries.** This entails greater research into informal volunteering in these contexts, as well as enabling researchers from middle- and lower- income countries to bring national perspectives to this work. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods offers the potential to understand patterns, scale, meanings, experiences and contextual details of informal volunteering. Qualitative approaches, co-research and volunteer advisory boards can be used to ground research in locally relevant concepts.

- ▶▶ **UN entities: initiate and nurture an international network of research organizations focused on progressing research on direct informal volunteer work across diverse settings.**

This effort should involve researchers from universities, NGOs and beyond. In parallel, UN entities can support national statistical offices to measure direct informal volunteer work. UNV and the International Labour Organization (ILO) can also continue to curate informal volunteering research.

- ▶▶ **Volunteer organizations: complement and learn from informal volunteering.**

In some circumstances informal volunteering brings a sense of closeness and belonging which enhances engagement for those involved. Some formal volunteering organizations are already emulating this by boosting relationality and flexibility. Further, volunteer organizations could find ways to strengthen community engagement which could enable and support informal volunteer work.

- ▶▶ **Informal volunteers: voice their experiences and needs, find time to respond to surveys, act as expert advisers or co-researchers and otherwise engage with efforts to understand and support their unpaid work.**

If informal volunteers were to engage in the narration and documentation of their experiences, this could help to deepen understandings of what this work involves.

Scan the QR code to read the full report.



<https://knowledge.unv.org/evidence-library/informal-volunteering-trends-and-characteristics>