RESEARCH BRIEF · INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF VOLUNTEERS 2026

Beyond Linear Pathways

A longitudinal case study of evolving youth volunteering practice in Nigeria, 2020 to 2026

Francisca Nzeagwu · Independent Researcher and Creative Advocate, Abuja, Nigeria · October 2026

In brief. Volunteering pathways are often designed as a ladder: a young person starts informally, joins an organisation and moves into more structured roles. This brief follows one young Nigerian practitioner across five documented episodes between 2020 and 2026. Her voluntary engagement did not climb a ladder. It moved back and forth between self-organised, episodic, skills-based, digital and formal volunteering, depending on the cause, the context and the opportunity available. The brief asks whether volunteer-involving organisations are set up to recognise and support that kind of movement.

Why this matters

Most volunteering happens outside organisations. The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report, drawing on new ILO global estimates, finds that 25 per cent of working-age people volunteer directly and informally, compared with 11.7 per cent who volunteer through organisations. Africa records the highest regional volunteer rate, at 58.5 per cent of working-age people.

UNV's 2026 comparative study of eight countries, including Nigeria, found that informal volunteering accounts for the vast majority of volunteer activity. Yet much of the infrastructure that recruits, recognises and measures volunteers is built around formal, organisation-based roles. Young people who move between informal and formal modes can fall through the gaps.

The case

This is a bounded case study of the author's own voluntary engagement. It draws on programme records, published features, third-party recognition and practitioner reflection. All the work described was unpaid and freely chosen. Volunteers at outreach events received food and water but no payment.

Period	Episode	Mode of volunteering
2020	A spontaneous conversation about menstrual health in an Abuja hair salon becomes the starting point of SiisiiRed Initiative	Self-organised, direct volunteering, with no host organisation
2021 to 2022	Community menstrual health outreaches in six Abuja communities and eight Nigerian states	Episodic and skills-based: around 30 volunteers contributed design, photography, video editing and logistics on outreach days
2022 to 2024	*Conversations: Period*, an intergenerational interview series, and Crimson Collectibles, a literary competition held with five secondary schools in 2023	Digitally mediated and creative, organised through a youth-led initiative

2025	Twelve-week UN Online Volunteering assignment with UNV ESARO	Formal, organisation-based and fully online
2025 to 2026	*Volunteers Anthem*, an original song for International Volunteer Year 2026, listed as an IVY 2026 resource on this portal	Self-initiated, skills-based creative contribution, later recognised by a formal institution

What the case shows

- **The path was not linear.** The formal UN assignment came five years into the journey, not at the start. Afterwards, engagement returned to a self-initiated creative mode rather than continuing up a formal track.
- **The cause led, not the institution.** Each shift followed the issue at hand and the skills it needed. This fits what Hustinx and Lammertyn (2003) call a reflexive style of volunteering: individually shaped, episodic and driven by personal values, as opposed to a collective style rooted in long-term membership of one organisation.
- **Much of the work would be hard to count.** The ILO Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work (2011) distinguishes direct volunteering from organisation-based volunteering. Four of the five episodes sit in the direct or self-organised space, where contributions are most easily missed by registers and surveys.
- **Recognition arrived late and from outside.** Formal recognition came through a creative output in 2026, not through the years of community work that preceded it.

Implications for volunteer-involving organisations

- **Design for entry, exit and re-entry.** Treat movement between informal and formal volunteering as normal, not as drop-out.
- **Recognise self-organised and creative contributions.** Make room for volunteers who bring their own initiatives, campaigns and creative work, not only those who fill pre-defined roles.
- **Record skills, not just hours.** Episodic, skills-based contributions such as design or video editing are easily lost when only time is counted.
- **Connect with youth-led initiatives.** Informal groups mobilise volunteers that formal programmes rarely reach. Partnerships can make that contribution visible.

Limitations

This is a single case, and the author is also its subject. It does not claim to represent Nigerian youth volunteering in general. The evidence is documentary and reflective rather than drawn from formal, ethics-approved data collection. The brief is offered to raise questions for practice and further research, not to settle them.

Next steps

A full paper developing this analysis is in preparation. Comments and collaboration from researchers and practitioners working on youth volunteering in Africa are welcome.

References

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Contact: Francisca Nzeagwu, SiisiiRed Initiative, Abuja, Nigeria. This brief may be shared with attribution.