

Flourishing in the New Normal

Reimagining
Volunteering:
2030 and Beyond



Plan of Action
to integrate volunteering
into the 2030 Agenda

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INTRODUCTION



We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred [...] our data banks and dead ideas [...]. Or we can walk through lightly [...] ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Arundhati Roy, Author¹

The world is shifting and challenging our long-held assumptions about what is needed to achieve social progress, sustainability, equity and justice. Long-mounting, interconnected risks are being felt the world over. The anxiety sweeping across the globe today signals that, despite economic progress and actions against poverty, hunger and disease, “many societies are not working as they should”.² Against this backdrop, the COVID-19 global pandemic has permanently altered our commons. It is widely believed that we will see a global recession in 2020 that could be even more severe than the global financial crisis in 2008 and threatens to push half a billion people in developing countries into poverty.³

While it is easy to lose ourselves in dystopias, there are also countless examples of possibilities and imagined futures. Cities are being reimaged and new technologies allow us to be more connected than ever before. Growing protest movements paint a picture of anger but they also point to something else: people’s burning desire to act collectively and have agency to create better futures. As young leaders around the world have shown, diverse groups are seeking recognition and representation and people are joining together in mutual aid. It is an example of how our greatest challenges can bring the best of humanity to the fore.

The global shifts noted in this piece are *tipping points* for our world, but they are by no means fixed. They are subjective and iterative in nature. The *convergence of these global shifts and the resulting uncertainty* will arguably be the key constants of the next decade, even more so in the context of COVID-19, which has amplified the evolution of our new normals. This paper does not aim to pose solutions: the practice of futures is one that challenges us to bring assumptions to the surface, to search for syntheses and provocations and to draw on our collective expertise to find ways through.

We find ourselves living in a moment in which millions of individuals all over the world are strengthening collective action that encompasses all areas of society. How governments and volunteering bodies respond to this phenomenon and the ability to create a broader space for citizen engagement will be pivotal for our global humanity.

1. A PLANET IN PAIN

In 2019, Australia caught fire. Indonesia is planning to move its capital city from Jakarta, which is being swallowed by the sea.⁴ Parts of traditionally warm areas, such as Australia and the Middle East, may become uninhabitable. And Europe is beginning to sweat.

The climate crisis is a threat multiplier: the people who are most vulnerable and have the least resources to adapt, especially those living in fragile contexts, will bear the brunt of the impact. Cities at sea level, such as Lagos and Mumbai, are on red alert. According to the World Bank, there will be 143 million additional climate migrants from the three regions of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia by 2050.⁵ Migration driven by climate change could increase the threat of conflict as arable land and water become increasingly scarce. The intersecting threat of conflict is occurring in a context in which deep poverty and vulnerability will be increasingly concentrated in countries affected by fragility, conflict and violence and where almost half of the world's poor are expected to live by 2030.⁶

The pervasive risks facing our planet have created a growing sense of public urgency. Emerging leaders are issuing a global rallying call to action. We can see this in cities such as Milan, which is implementing three pillars of a “Plan Zero” for its post-COVID “new normal”, which includes green wayfinding and the environmental transition.⁷ Similarly, the Republic of Korea is implementing a green new deal, which formed a key part of its elections, which took place during the pandemic.⁸

This radically changing ecosystem forces us to rethink social solidarity and volunteering in times of crisis. Where government and public good institutions are unable to deliver social services, we rely on humanitarian volunteers to be at the front-line.⁹ How can we support volunteering models in such fragility? How can we continue to support social cohesion and ways of belonging if people are forced to leave their homes and cross borders? How can we intensify civic engagement to support new transitions to a safer, healthier planet? In considering these questions, we should consider that we may no longer be able to force our environment to adapt to us; instead, it is humanity that must adapt to a changing environment.

2. A DIGITAL RENAISSANCE

The “smart everything” paradigm appears to be the call to arms of the twenty-first century. Increased Internet access means improvements in a range of categories and channels have helped make governments more responsive to their citizens' concerns.¹⁰ However, technology inequality is growing and only those who can get online can thrive. Technology design often makes significant assumptions about the needs, requirements, and agency of its users and people who are marginalized and excluded do not have the opportunity to inform its architecture or even give their consent. However, inequalities in internet access do not necessarily lead to social unrest.¹¹ The opposite may also be true. Many countries have cut off Internet access during episodes of social unrest.¹² The rise of automation has long been associated with concerns about increased job losses and the futures of work. However, the evidence is increasingly pointing to more jobs as a result of the fourth industrial revolution, not less.¹³

COVID-19 has brought to the foreground digital initiatives that only months ago were on the sidelines. Digital transformation processes of governments and institutions have been accelerated by the world's largest experiment in working from home.¹⁴ However, there is concern that the emergency measures put in place for the duration of the pandemic will become permanent. In a recent article, Evgeny Morozov argues that “the world is currently enthralled by solutionist tech—from a Polish app that requires coronavirus patients to regularly take selfies to prove they are indoors, to China's colour-coded smartphone health-rating programme, which tracks who is allowed to leave the house”.¹⁵

We often talk about what is changing, yet many things also stay the same. Regardless of technology impacts on workflows, it is the social fabric that keeps connectivity going. It requires people to fix the glitches, the errors, the integration. What are the new ways of working needed to ease the integration and enable the intelligent functioning of technology? Will new forms of networked jobs like independent fact-checkers supporting social media giants battling misinformation become a new normal?¹⁶

The “AI from the grassroots” posited by supporters of open innovation offers an alternative path in which AI can be harnessed as a tool for “mass flourishing.”¹⁷ This digital renaissance points to a challenge to the traditional linear approaches of civic engagement as emerging technologies are democratizing access to information, participation and agency.¹⁸ How then can more traditional volunteer models embrace digital communities and states? With social distancing measures set to be in place until 2022,¹⁹ will traditional, face-to-face voluntary work need to shift to the purely virtual? Will civic participation and social rituals be forever changed? Will this exclude those left further behind without a mobile phone subscription or reliable broadband Internet in countries categorized as having low human development?²⁰

3. THE TYRANNY OF INEQUALITY

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, remarkable progress has been made to reduce extreme deprivation. However, the gaps are still unacceptably wide in numerous areas, including the freedom for people to be who they want to be and go to school, get a job, and even have enough to eat. In this decade, we are experiencing a generation of inequalities that go beyond income and economics to encompass access to health and education, dignity, respect for human rights and technology and connectivity.²¹

Against this backdrop, there is a global paradox of trust, since there is distrust in the four institutions of our societies (government, business, NGOs and media).²² There is a growing sense that our global economic and political systems are built to benefit the privileged few at the expense of the many. Concerns about inequality and trust underlie recent social unrest on almost every continent.

COVID-19 is laying bare socio-economic inequalities and there are signs that these will be exacerbated in the near future.²³ The pandemic has created an economic crisis, causing unemployment rates to rise substantially and weaken welfare safety nets, further threatening health and social security.²⁴ Furthermore, the design of social distancing measures and social safety net policies does not adequately account for the almost one billion people who live in slums or work in the gig economy.²⁵ How can we continue to

care for the most vulnerable people in our societies if national funds are likely to fall significantly in the near future as they are redirected to the response to the pandemic? As Muggah and Ermacorra note, “the severity of the pandemic is connected fundamentally to governance”.²⁶ The ability of governments to respond quickly is not necessarily tied to the apparent wealth of a country but rather to the ability to innovate, pivot and see the people who are often invisible.²⁷

A nuanced perspective to this is that despite the tyranny of inequality and distrust, people are trusting their fellow citizens or people within their local community.²⁸ Efforts to stem the pandemic are threatening people’s social and economic livelihoods and their reactions shine a light on areas with contradicting values when it comes to social solidarity. Could volunteering shift long-standing narratives about *why* and *what it takes for* people to mobilize? Could this indicate that volunteering and solidarity could be an antidote to the tensions we are experiencing?

4. REIMAGINING VOLUNTEERING



We don’t know what is going to happen, or how, or when, and that very uncertainty is the space of hope.

Rebecca Solnit, Author²⁹

Where can we find hope? This is a question that demands a nuanced answer. Despite the uncertainty we are facing collectively, there are signs of a way forward. This can be seen in the rapid change in civic engagement, social movements and activism. People from all walks of life (particularly young people) and civil society actors in many countries are channelling their anxieties into activism and social action: 6 million students from 150 countries participated in the youth-organized “Fridays for Future” climate strikes.³⁰ COVID-19 has further inspired an unprecedented surge of voluntary efforts. Across different countries, people are coming together in new voluntary associations and mutual aid societies. Where public good institutions are failing to respond to vulnerable groups that are being left out of policy design, people are self-organizing and self-mobilizing to fill the gaps. In Tunisia, more than 10,000 people have joined a Facebook group bringing together volunteers to help fight the virus.³¹ Mass online collaboration has flourished, from global hackathons to the use of collective intelligence.³²

This indicates that *how* and *why* people engage in civic participation are changing dramatically. People are moving away from institutional loyalty in favour of the causes and issues closest to their hearts. The current surge in civic organization highlights the vital role of volunteering alongside civic action to strengthen social cohesion and sustain vibrant, healthy communities and democracy more widely.³³ New forms of volunteering and civic engagement have been evolving over the last few years, but these seismic tipping points are accelerating it. Can civic engagement and volunteerism provide a new model for belonging, identity and connection in the future? Are they more than the sum of their parts and, if taken

together, could they fundamentally challenge power structures and bring about political and economic change? How can we reimagine structures and enabling environments to help build coalitions across these networks to foster connectedness and the inclusion of those who are most affected?

Harnessing a new sense of solidarity could allow us all to rise to the enormous challenges ahead and transform our era of historic inequality into one of equity and justice. It might be the change needed to reshape volunteerism and civic engagement to go beyond just working with communities to enhance resilience, but rather as a platform to help us all flourish.

5. HOW MIGHT THIS HAPPEN?

Volunteering in the twenty-first century must be seen as a global public good as part of a global flourishing, that brings together multiple layers of society to rebuild for our new normals. Such a global flourishing must go beyond asking what the “tasks” are to coalesce movements around *what is possible* and *what is required*.

We have reached a point where our commons have fundamentally and irrevocably shifted. The range of choices about the type of futures we want to inhabit has expanded exponentially, and the choices we make now will decide our collective fates going forward. The very nature of voluntary service is also changing, from its motivations and approaches to how people engage and whom they engage with. Top-down volunteering models are not fit for our complex futures. However, one could equally argue that grass-roots, organic, people-driven models are not sustainable drivers of long-lasting change. How then can we design blended models that, taken together, can radically combine multiple approaches and principles to amplify our collective efforts?

5.1. Volunteering to amplify social flourishing

One of the key determinants of a state’s ability to mitigate the fallout of any crisis is through its ability to mobilize different segments of its society to respond to the crisis. Could new forms of volunteering bring together the complex universe of groups, to ensure no one falls through the cracks or gets missed? Can new forms of volunteering help redesign social policies to ensure people normally on the receiving end of services are not helpless beneficiaries but rather active participants in the systems that govern their lives? Could new forms of volunteering and civic engagement provide a catalyst for greater intersectional equity (i.e. equity encompassing multiple social categories, such as race, gender, sexuality and nationalities)?

Viet Nam provides a remarkable example in terms of how it has mobilized multiple groups across the country to develop testing kits.³⁴ Similarly, intergenerational policies and programmes are also being implemented through initiatives such as the Committee for the Future in Finland and the Future Generations Commissioner in Wales.³⁵ Volunteering and mutual aid groups are already supporting the epidemic of loneliness and mental illness aggravated by this crisis.³⁶ Bangladesh is experimenting with shared intelligence and pooling knowledge to help its population and businesses cope with the challenges of change to build adaptive national systems for the future(s) of work.³⁷

Now is the moment for a genuine *transformation* of how volunteering, civic action, private sector, government and formal public good infrastructures fit together. This is a moment when civic groups stepping

in to help deliver services to affected groups complement not contradict essential service delivery. Now is the moment for volunteering infrastructures that can coalesce grass-roots change-makers and adapt to a bias towards action. A focus on society flourishing as a whole encourages more compassionate and urgent responses that are nimble, sustainable, creative and holistic. Ensuring society flourishes as a whole means that when crises occur, all parts of society can respond and that we are all—collectively—“anti-fragile”, that is to say we can flourish in an uncertain world.

5.2. Volunteering to harness a digital civil society

There is nothing inevitable about an inequitable, colonized tech future (or futures). Indeed, we are seeing a pushback against “technological solutionism”, i.e. the idea that technology can provide neat solutions to all our problems.³⁸ Digital initiatives are often imposed on people who are rarely consulted about their deployment. They certainly do not consider the impacts of technocratic visions on the homeless, the elderly and young offenders. Civil society actors, volunteers, faith leaders and NGO workers are absent from these conversations even though they have more deep expertise in how life is actually lived and the kind of society people want to live.

A digital civil society, where citizens and civil society actors can actively shape the digital public realm, is slowly taking root. Initiatives such as Whose Knowledge?³⁹ and the Glimmers project⁴⁰ are showing how people are playing a much stronger role in transforming digital social contracts to safeguard digital public norms and spaces. This phenomenon is raising questions that go to the heart of what a digital civil society structure might look like: *How can civil society support more people in a world where technology both individualizes and connects individuals, families, workers, learners and whole communities? Whose voices matter? What are the moral needs? Who and what needs protecting?*⁴¹ Volunteering plays an intrinsic role in digital civil society, connecting social fabric.

5.3. Volunteering to foster inclusive growth

Different governments are experimenting with new models of economic growth that are more equitable and within planetary boundaries. Amsterdam’s shift to implementing the “doughnut model” as an alternative to growth economics to mend the city’s economy in the wake of the pandemic indicates a desire to pursue safer, fairer and more inclusive models of growth.⁴² Could reimagined volunteering be a key accelerator for inclusive growth, encouraging governance models to move beyond “whole-of-government” approaches to a “whole-of-society” engagement? Could volunteering and civic engagement models provide equitable platforms where all people can be seen, heard and represented (such architectures being key aspects of inclusive growth)?

Accelerating inclusion also means making access more even, valuing the ways people contribute, and protecting them when their contribution puts them in harm’s way. Regardless of whether volunteering is on the front-line of emergency or crisis responses or capability building to future-proof skill sets, how can we rethink social safety nets to reduce the barriers to participation?⁴³

5.4. Volunteering as global belonging

If we consider both the fluidity and restrictiveness of social movements and people's sense of belonging, can we expand nationally confined solutions for volunteering to a global infrastructure? How can we broaden volunteering from a focus on local solidarity and community building to encompass a global, cross-border sense of belonging and identity? Could these global volunteering infrastructures then be modelled to provide civil society solutions across borders for advocacy, policy design, work, reskilling and community cohesion in the forms of community that people identify with?

To collectively flourish, the responsibility of change and innovation cannot be relegated to the individual and community level. Volunteering infrastructures, both local and global, must evolve into emergent, learning ecosystems that recognize the fragility of the status quo. Internal capacities for anticipation, innovation, radical inclusion, adaptive strategies and learning are integral to responding to change in an agile manner without causing hindrance.

The futures we face are a complex and multiple cluster of interrelated problems. To face them, we need a cluster of interrelated, networked solutions. We need brilliant people to think about global regulations fit for the future and sufficiently organic to allow complex and diverse solutions to emerge: solutions that have not yet been envisaged. This is the only way to reimagine volunteering to provide a catalyst to achieving the SDGs by 2030 at a time when we are beginning to have grave doubts as to whether they can be achieved.

NOTES

- 1** Roy 2020.
- 2** United Nations Development Programme 2019.
- 3** Al Jazeera 2020, Sumner, Hoy and Ortiz-Juarez 2020.
- 4** Watts 2019.
- 5** Podesta 2019.
- 6** World Bank 2016.
- 7** Wray 2020.
- 8** Farand 2020.
- 9** Forrest 2020.
- 10** Ovide 2019.
- 11** Swisher 2019.
- 12** Rydzak 2018.
- 13** Menon 2019.
- 14** Hern 2020.
- 15** Morozov 2020.
- 16** Scott 2020.
- 17** Li and Pauwels 2018.
- 18** International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2018.
- 19** Wood 2020.
- 20** Kovacevic and Javic 2020
- 21** United Nations Development Programme 2019.
- 22** Edelman 2020.
- 23** Bergamini 2020.
- 24** Ahmed, Ahmed, Pissarides and Stiglitz 2020.
- 25** Riley, Raphael and Snyder 2020.
- 26** Muggah and Ermacorra 2020.
- 27** Regional Innovation Centre UNDP Asia-Pacific 2020.
- 28** Edelman 2020.
- 29** Solnit 2005.
- 30** Wikipedia 2020.
- 31** Business News Tunisia 2020.
- 32** Russiver 2020, Berditchevskaia and Peach 2020.
- 33** Loh, Love and Vey 2020.
- 34** Klingler-Vidra, Tran and Uusikyla 2020.
- 35** Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development 2014, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales 2020.
- 36** Kanter and Manbeck 2020.
- 37** Mulgan and Chowdhury 2020.
- 38** Schwartz 2019.
- 39** Whose Knowledge (n.d.).
- 40** Coldicutt 2020.
- 41** Robinson 2020.
- 42** Boffey 2020.
- 43** Wignaraja and Horvath 2020.

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PLAN OF ACTION TO INTEGRATE VOLUNTEERING INTO THE 2030 AGENDA

The Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda is a framework under the auspices of the United Nations through which Governments, United Nations entities, volunteer-involving organizations, private sector, civil society including academia and other stakeholders come together to integrate volunteerism into the planning and implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by:

- a) strengthening people's ownership of the development agenda;
- b) integrating volunteerism into national and global implementation strategies; and
- c) measuring volunteerism.

 www.unv.org/planofaction

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