
THE CONTRIBUTION OF VOLUNTEERING IN HUMAN MOBILITY CONTEXTS

RESEARCH PAPER



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ACRONYMS

CSO	Civil Society Organization
CPD	Country Programme Document
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GCM	Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GFMD	Global Forum on Migration & Development
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IMRF	International Migration Review Forum
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JRS	Jesuit Refugee Service
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and more
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MHV	Migrant Health Volunteer
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NG-TTC	New Generation Teacher Training Center
REAP	Risk-informed Early Action Partnership
ROV	Refugee Outreach Volunteer
RYVU	Refugee Youth Volunteering in Uganda

SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
SRP	Student Refugee Program
SWVR	State of the World's Volunteerism Report
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN MGCY	United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WUSC	World University Service of Canada

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A record number of people are currently on the move due to emergency situations, including armed conflicts, natural disasters, famine, epidemics and other circumstances. As of mid-2024, it was estimated that 122.6 million people worldwide were displaced because of these factors.¹ Populations on the move face a multitude of risks: violence, exploitation, discrimination and reduced access to basic services.

Volunteers play a crucial role in addressing the challenges associated with migration. They support protective, inclusive responses as well as foster long-term development and resilience. They also help relieve the disruptive effects of human mobility, mitigate migration-related risks and vulnerabilities and work toward durable solutions that prioritize the safety, dignity and well-being of individuals and communities.

This report explores the understudied role of volunteers and volunteer-involving organizations within human mobility contexts. It provides evidence on how volunteering helps fill critical gaps in humanitarian assistance and protection. These efforts include supporting gender equality and inclusion, preventing and responding to disaster displacement and facilitating migrant integration and settlement. The report also examines how volunteers influence migration policy and governance at various levels as they raise awareness about the challenges surrounding human mobility. In addition, volunteer-involving organizations are encouraging supportive remedies based on the principles of dignity and human rights, as well as participating in social activism.

Special attention is given to migrant volunteers' contributions when providing humanitarian assistance. For example, they play an important role in promoting social cohesion and integration between migrants and host communities. This report also considers how volunteering intersects with volunteers' livelihoods, offering recommendations to ensure that volunteering practices do not inadvertently heighten their economic precarity or lead to exploitation.

The research also assesses and contextualizes the integration of volunteering into national and international migration governance and development plans, policies and strategies. It demonstrates how United Nations Member States and United Nations agencies can leverage volunteering by and for migrants to advance more equitable and sustainable responses to human mobility challenges. This is critical to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly in relation to SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) 10.7 on the facilitation of orderly, safe and responsible migration and SDG 16 relating to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies.



1. INTRODUCTION

A record number of people are currently on the move due to emergency situations, including armed conflicts, natural disasters, famine, epidemics, and other circumstances.² As of mid-2024, estimates indicated that over 122.6 million people worldwide were displaced because of these factors, including at least 43.7 million refugees and 72.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Further increases are anticipated, particularly in Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine and the Gaza Strip.³

Sudan, Palestine and the Democratic Republic of the Congo accounted for nearly two-thirds of the 20.5 million new conflict-related displacements in 2023.⁴ Additionally, disasters exacerbated by climate change triggered 26.4 million new displacements, marking the third highest recorded number in the past decade. Countries in East Asia and the Pacific, including China, the Philippines and Myanmar, experienced the largest share of displacements.⁵

The drivers of migration are often interconnected with economic factors and social inequalities,⁶ as well as the high demand for migrant labour in many destination countries.⁷ At the same time, the narrowing of regular migration pathways for individuals from developing countries has pushed many to resort to irregular migration.⁸

Host communities in low- and middle-income countries bear most of the burden of displacement. They frequently contend with high levels of poverty, conflict, exposure to climate shocks and hazards and limited capacity to manage mass arrivals.⁹ Yet, global responses and responsibility sharing for large-scale movements continue to fall short, with widening gaps in global financing for humanitarian aid despite increasing needs.¹⁰

All types of human mobility, whether migration, displacement or planned relocation, present populations on the move with risks, including violence, exploitation, discrimination and restricted access to basic services. It is important that all migrants, regardless of their status, are afforded safety and guaranteed their fundamental rights during transit and on arrival in host communities.

Coordinated, whole-of-society responses, including the critical contributions of volunteers, are needed to respond to human mobility in all its dimensions, mitigating migration-related risks and vulnerabilities and fostering durable solutions that prioritize the safety, dignity and well-being of individuals and communities.

1.1 Volunteering in human mobility contexts

Defining volunteering

The 2002 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution 56/38 defines voluntary activities as those “undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor.”¹¹ This definition rests on the understanding that volunteering traditionally does not involve material or monetary gain and seeks to benefit individuals outside one’s own familial circle. However, in contexts of migration and displacement, volunteer efforts often intersect with personal and community needs, sometimes involving remuneration or incentives, especially in locally driven humanitarian responses.

Volunteering can take many forms, with roles and the nature of provided services varying across different mobility contexts. The 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR) points out that volunteering can differ in structure (formal or informal), site (online or offline), intensity (episodic or regular), aspiration (self-building or community-building) and category (service, mutual aid, participation, campaigning or leisure). While some volunteers are recruited from subregional, national or international pools, most humanitarian and crisis response efforts rely on local volunteers working within their own communities.¹² It is not uncommon for volunteers to belong to affected populations, whether as members of host communities, migrants, refugees or displaced persons themselves.¹³

There is growing recognition for the important, yet often less visible, role of informal volunteering, which occurs organically and outside of organizational structures.¹⁴ Previous research has demonstrated the value of self-organized local volunteering in providing response and early recovery in crisis contexts which allows for greater flexibility and quicker response times compared to formal volunteering.¹⁵ Self-organized volunteering has also proven effective in extending assistance to underserved groups and hard-to-reach communities who may otherwise not receive support.¹⁶

Participation in volunteering

In 2022, an estimated 862.4 million people aged 15 and above volunteered worldwide. However, the true number is likely higher, as many countries only report formal volunteering, while data on informal volunteering — outside of registered organizations — remains harder to track, despite being more common.¹⁷

Volunteers have a strong presence in key United Nations (UN) agencies supporting migrants, refugees and IDPs. In 2024, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) hosted 973 UN Volunteers, and 948 UN Volunteers served with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).¹⁸ In 2023, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the world's largest humanitarian network with around 16.7 million volunteers, trained volunteers and staff to provide support to 13.6 million people on the move globally.¹⁹

People volunteer in human mobility settings for many reasons: out of compassion or a desire to give back to their community, personal beliefs, the pursuit of connection, personal growth or experience. However, not everyone has the same opportunity to volunteer. Factors such as where a person lives, gender, age, migration status and social or political circumstances can both enable participation and create barriers.²⁰ Women, youth, persons with disabilities, migrants with irregular status, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals and other historically marginalized groups often face barriers to accessing volunteering opportunities and the services provided by volunteers. Furthermore, in humanitarian crises, volunteers often face unique challenges, especially if they are part of the affected community or are working in high-risk environments.²¹

Globally, a higher percentage of women participate in volunteering compared to men — 57 per cent versus 43 per cent respectively.²² However, women are more likely to participate in informal volunteering within their communities, often as an extension of domestic or caregiving roles. Formal volunteering, which typically provides more important opportunities for skills development and access to resources, is often limited for women in contexts with restrictive societal and gender norms, including gender disparities in education and labour market access.²³

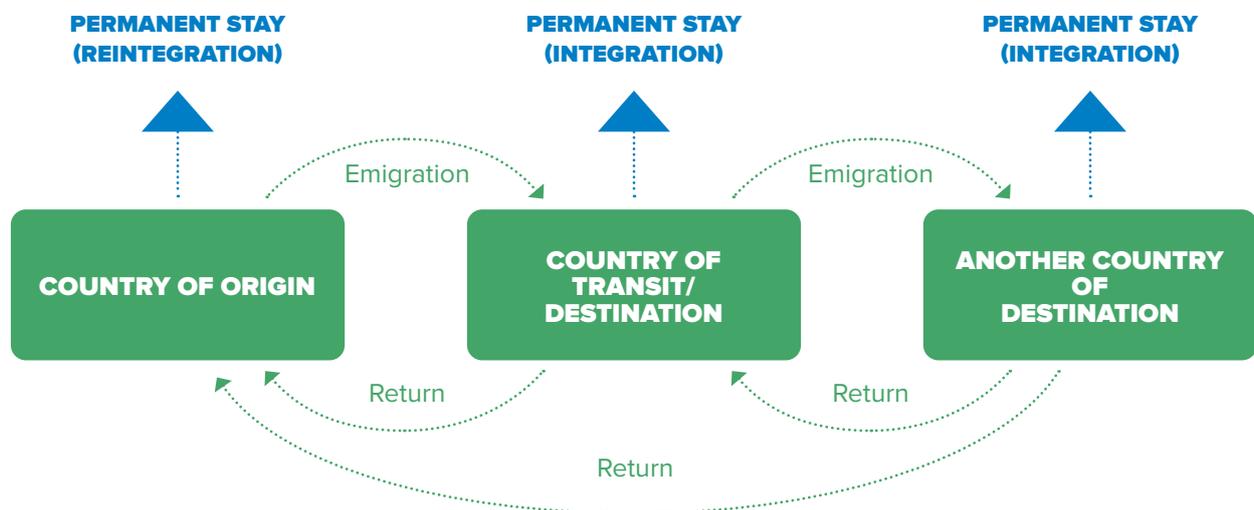
Research in several countries has shown that migrants are less likely to volunteer formally compared to native-born populations.²⁴ Similarly, in Australia, skilled visa holders and longer-term residents are more likely to volunteer formally than new arrivals.²⁵ Additionally, digital divides and technological barriers disproportionately impact young people, women, rural dwellers, the elderly and persons with disabilities, hindering participation in volunteering.²⁶

Implementing inclusive policies and laws for volunteering can encourage equitable and diverse participation, helping dismantle barriers faced by migrants, women, youth, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. On the other hand, certain policies and laws may restrict or overly regulate diverse participation and civic space for volunteering, especially for migrants and non-nationals. A more detailed discussion on shrinking civic space appears below (see section 3.2.).

Volunteering along the migration cycle

Volunteers support people on the move at every stage of their migration journey, including pre-departure, transit, arrival, settlement and return and sustainable integration or reintegration. In many instances, especially in humanitarian contexts, these processes are non-linear, with re-migration or onward movement common in many individual journeys.²⁷ This migration cycle is illustrated in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: The migration cycle



Source: adapted from IOM, EMM2.0 Handbook. (IOM n.d.b)

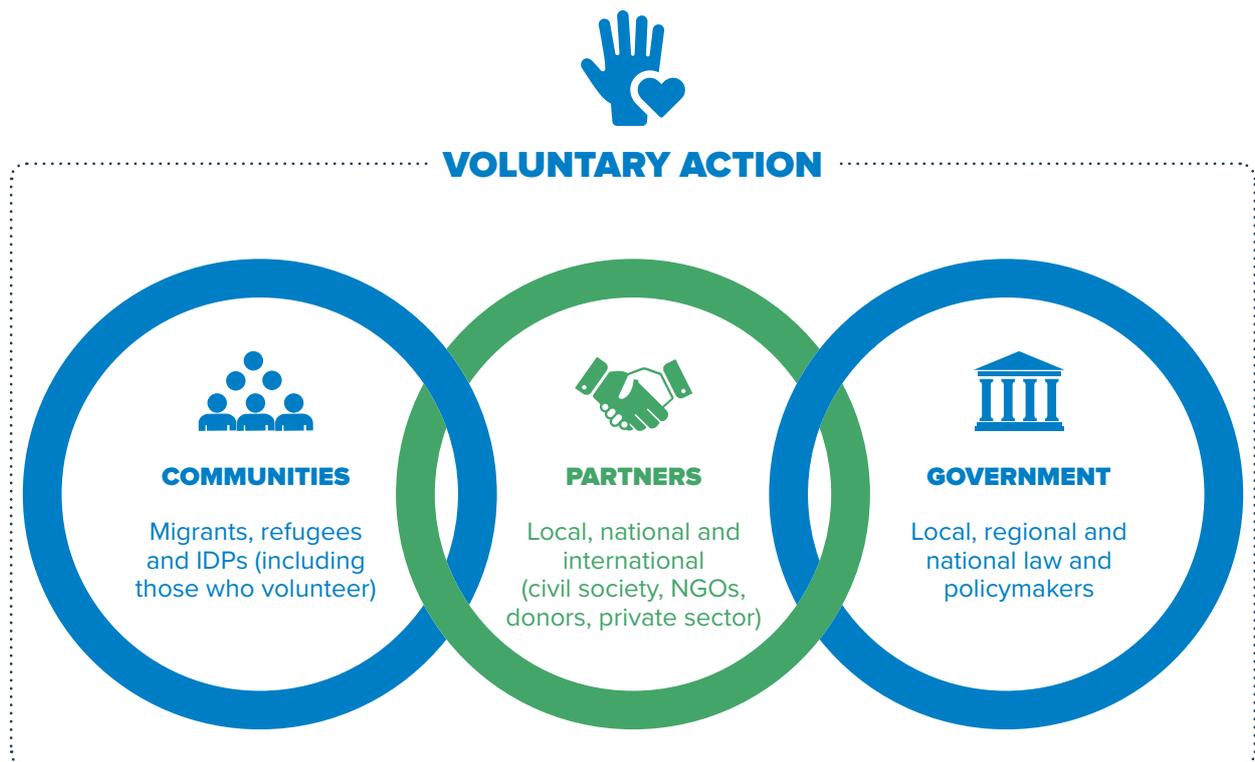
Before departure, volunteers help migrants navigate legal processes and identify regular pathways for migration. Often the first points of contact for migrants in transit or in host communities, volunteers provide essential support, connecting migrants to emergency services, addressing unique gender-specific challenges and championing inclusion. As part of integration efforts, these volunteers become vital bridges for migrants settling in their new communities or reintegrating into their communities of origin. Volunteers also help build social connections, creating opportunities for migrants which foster long-term stability and resilience.

1.2 Volunteering can help maximize the benefits of migration for sustainable development

Volunteer groups are recognized as key partners in working with governments to achieve the UN’s 2030 Agenda.²⁸ Many activities carried out by volunteers contribute to advancing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10.7. This goal calls for the “orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.” Volunteer groups’ efforts also support the objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the United Nations Secretary-General’s Action Agenda on Internal Displacement and the core commitments outlined in the 2016 Agenda for Humanity. Effective volunteer contributions can help maximize the benefits of migration for sustainable development, by upholding “the safety, dignity and human rights of all migrants, regardless of their migration status,” and by facilitating access to durable solutions, as called for in the Pact for the Future.²⁹

The GCM emphasizes the need for a whole-of-society approach to migration governance through multi-stakeholder partnerships (see figure 2).¹ Volunteers, who are often members of local communities, civil society organizations or migrant populations, are among the key actors in these partnerships. By contributing their voices to migration policy and dialogues, they can help foster more inclusive and participatory governance systems in migration contexts, ensuring that the voices of migrants and local populations are heard.

FIGURE 2: Volunteering as part of a whole-of-society approach to migration governance



Source: Created by the author, inspired by IREX (n.d.)

ⁱ These include: “migrants, diasporas, local communities, civil society, academia, the private sector, parliamentarians, trade unions, National Human Rights Institutions, the media and other relevant stakeholders.” UNGA 2018b.

Volunteers also contribute to fostering peaceful, inclusive and just societies, as envisioned in SDG 16. Local volunteers, with their strong community connections and adaptability, are particularly powerful in promoting social cohesion, reducing tensions and supporting migrant integration in host communities. Migrants who volunteer also bring valuable perspectives and play an active role in shaping services and policies to meet communities' needs, including those specific to women and girls.³⁰ This “co-productive”³¹ approach, endorsed by both the GCMⁱⁱ and the Migrants in Countries in Crisis Guidelines,³² advances local integration efforts.

Local volunteer initiatives are often first to respond to mass migration or displacement events. However, without external support, these community-based initiatives can easily become overstretched, which can lead to responses that prioritize immediate needs at the expense of long-term resilience.³³ Governments and other peace and development actors need to support volunteers effectively. Such support should not only complement local efforts but also create a volunteering ecosystem that furthers national development plans and priorities, fosters partnerships with local communities, opens volunteer opportunities to all individuals, including migrants, and sets clear, equitable standards for volunteering.

1.3 About this report

Purpose

Although there is growing recognition of volunteering's critical role in advancing development goals,ⁱⁱⁱ research on volunteers' specific contributions in humanitarian response and in fostering safe and inclusive human mobility remains limited. There is a need to further quantify and qualify the role of volunteer actors in providing humanitarian assistance and protection to diverse populations on the move.

As the UN's body dedicated to endorsing volunteering for peace and development, United Nations Volunteers (UNV) generates evidence and advocates for the integration of volunteering into Member States' and UN policies to further the SDGs.^{iv} UNV's previous research has recognized volunteers' contributions to climate action and community resilience,³⁴ and efforts to “leave no one behind,”³⁵ providing strategies to better integrate volunteering into development policy and programming.

To support the existing evidence base, the present research sets out to compile available evidence on volunteering's contributions to humanitarian protection and assistance within human mobility contexts. The study findings and policy recommendations aim to support the integration of volunteers and volunteering into national development plans, sectoral policies, United Nations cooperation frameworks and entity country programmes as well as global and regional strategies that address human mobility.

ii Objective 19(f) of the GCM stipulates the commitment by States to “provide [...] tailored mechanisms for the coordinated and effective financial, voluntary or philanthropic engagement of migrants and diasporas, especially in humanitarian emergencies in their countries of origin, including by involving consular missions.”

iii See UNGA resolution “Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (resolution 73/140); UNGA resolution “Fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Volunteers programme and twentieth anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers” (resolution 76/131); and UNGA resolution “International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, 2026”, (resolution 78/127).

iv See UNGA (2024b) resolution 79/148 “Strengthening volunteerism for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, leaving no one behind”.

Methodology

This report draws on primary and secondary data collected through interviews with 17 individuals representing UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and volunteers. This review used an iterative and thematic approach to identify volunteer-involving programs, initiatives, policies, and strategies relating to diverse forms of human mobility. It included a review of reports and documentation referencing volunteering from UN agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments, and academia as well as grey literature.

This review identified four case studies from Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar and Peru, as well as other examples, which illustrate the role and contribution of volunteering to humanitarian assistance in contexts with migration and displacement. These case studies and examples reflect diverse geographic and human mobility contexts, as well as the contributions of volunteers from different stakeholder groups, including UN agencies, INGOs, CSOs, the private sector and community-driven responses.

To identify synergies with volunteering, a review of global, regional and national strategies, development plans and policies on development and migration was conducted. This included a review of UN Member States' Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF), Country Program Documents (CPDs) of various UN agencies, regional reviews, Member States' voluntary reporting and national plans relating to the enactment of the GCM, as well as the GCR.



2. VOLUNTEERING FOR SAFE AND INCLUSIVE RESPONSES TO HUMAN MOBILITY

In human mobility contexts, volunteers are key actors helping people on the move reconnect with family, community and cultural life, while also supporting livelihoods, education, and other aspects of life that migration and displacement can disrupt.

This section presents evidence for the broad range of ways that volunteers contribute to safe and inclusive responses to human mobility (see figure 3). They contribute to identification, information and outreach activities at all stages of the migration journey, including prior to departure, during transit, and as part of longer-term settlement. They support continued access to essential services, as well as inclusive and gender-integrated responses, while preparing for and responding to displacement, and promoting the achievement of durable solutions through sustainable integration and settlement.

FIGURE 3: Ways that volunteers can help provide safe and inclusive responses to human mobility



2.1 Identification, information and outreach

In contexts with high levels of mobility, volunteers can prove decisive in influencing decision-making and migration pathways through the information and outreach activities they provide. Volunteers are a common feature of awareness-raising campaigns, enhancing potential migrants' safe decision-making, by providing information on available regular migration pathways, sensitizing communities on the dangers and risks involved with irregular migration, and promoting local livelihood opportunities.³⁶ Numerous programs, such as “Migrants as Messengers” and “Community Conversations” run by the IOM (see box 1), and the “Telling the Real Story” initiative by UNHCR,³⁷ involve local community volunteers in these efforts.

BOX 1: The Migrants as Messengers Program – IOM, West Africa

The IOM’s “Migrants as Messengers” program (2019-2022) involved 417 returnee migrants (155 female, 262 male) as volunteers across West African countries to raise awareness and encourage youth to make informed migration-related decisions. Volunteers shared their migration experiences through community activities, social media and radio/TV, while actively contributing to campaign planning. Female volunteers played a key role in engaging women through tailored dialogue sessions.³⁸ Phase 2 of the project emphasized skills training in entrepreneurship and digital content creation, which supported the volunteers’ career development.³⁹ The campaigns also provided psychosocial benefits, helping returnees cope with stigma and reintegrate into society by giving them a sense of purpose and community.⁴⁰

Some organizations, such as the Chadian Red Cross, also utilize volunteers in migrant flow monitoring activities in areas where people on the move reside or are transiting. They provide support by monitoring and profiling mixed movements, collecting information on intentions to seek asylum and other related topics.⁴¹

In receiving countries, volunteers often provide critical information to help migrant communities understand their rights, access social services and protection schemes and navigate their new environments. For example, the Migrant Health Sub-Working Group, a joint initiative by the UN Network on Migration in Thailand in collaboration with the Royal Thai Government, trained over 7,000 migrant health volunteers (MHVs). These volunteers contribute to community-based disease surveillance and support fellow migrants in accessing health services and information, including providing interpretation services.⁴² MHVs have been effective in addressing issues like violence and discrimination, offering gender-integrated support, including for pregnant women, and raising awareness about sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

“MHVs play a crucial role in improving migrants’ access to healthcare by addressing cultural and linguistic barriers and enhancing risk communication. In migrant-dense areas, such as the provinces along the Thai-Myanmar border, MHVs support communication between migrants and healthcare workers by participating in consultations, providing interpretation, and conducting outreach and awareness-raising activities within their communities.”

Dr. Moemen Nader, Migrant Health Officer, IOM Thailand

Outreach volunteer efforts can take many forms, including online or remote modalities. Remote and hybrid models are valuable for expanding reach, especially in situations where access constraints make in-person support impossible or when affected populations reside in hard-to-reach areas. The effectiveness of digital modalities has been particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in the case study from Peru below.

CASE STUDY: Use of digital modalities in migrant outreach efforts, Peru

Peru hosts the second-largest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, with more than 1.5 million individuals recorded as of May 2024.⁴³ By the end of 2020, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this number had already exceeded 1 million, with nearly half a million applying for refugee status.⁴⁴ The UNHCR estimated that some 810,000 individuals were in situations of extreme vulnerability, requiring urgent support in areas such as nutrition, health and access to livelihood opportunities.⁴⁵

To effectively confront these critical needs across the country, while adapting to pandemic-related restrictions and closures, the volunteer initiative “Nourishing Hope, Protecting Families” was launched in Peru in 2021 as a joint effort by the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UNV.

The initiative focused on ensuring access to food, health services and social protection for Venezuelan refugees. It has provided tele-guidance to Venezuelan refugees across Peru related to good nutrition practices, economical shopping and access to social services. Importantly, tele-guidance activities were linked to a cash transfer program, enabling recipient families to apply this knowledge and financial support to purchase necessary food items.

“We discussed creating a weekly menu and introduced the concept of balanced nutrition, focusing on the different food groups. Some of the staple foods we recommended included menestra, lentils and quinoa.”

Patsy Gutiérrez, UN Volunteer Expert serving in volunteer management for UNDP Peru

The project utilized the expertise of 13 UN Volunteers specialized in digital volunteer management, who had prior experience with initiatives such as the Lima 2019 Pan American Games and the Peru Bicentennial Special Project.

Over 5,500 volunteers were mobilized, reaching some 65,000 Venezuelan families in the Tumbes region of Peru.⁴⁶ This significant achievement was made possible through large-scale volunteer recruitment and management processes. Volunteers were recruited nationwide through partnerships with universities and a national volunteer registry.

Volunteers were trained remotely, focusing on the Venezuelan migration context, program objectives and technical skills in providing nutritional and social support to diverse demographics. They also served as a source of emotional support for the families, as they navigated their new environment during a pandemic. Upon completing their service, volunteers received certificates recognizing their participation in training and the hours they contributed.

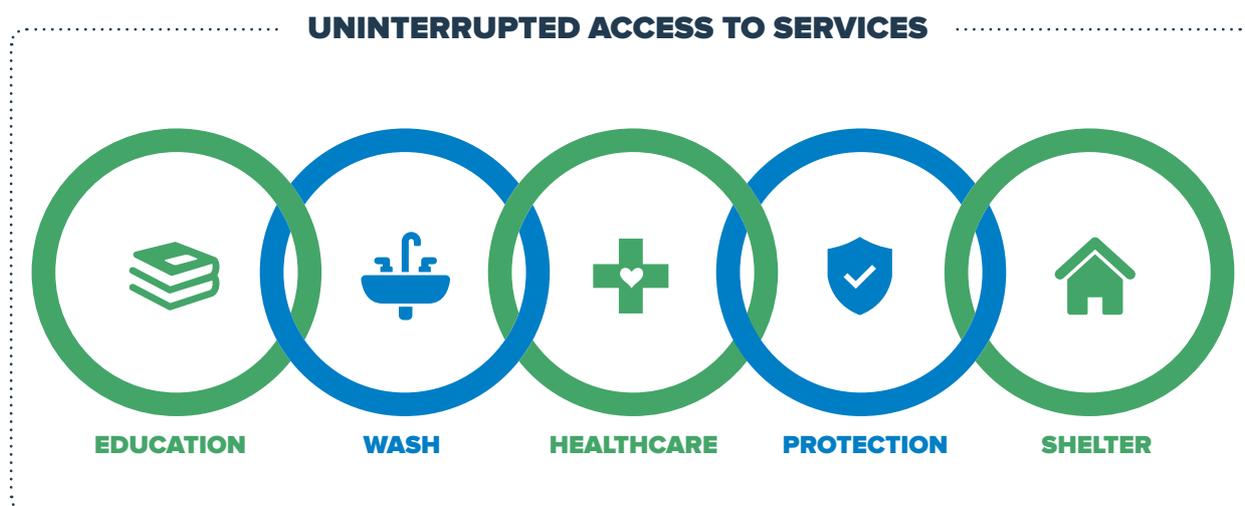
Key takeaways

- The experience of “Nourishing Hope, Protecting Families” illustrates the effectiveness of remote volunteer outreach, providing sustained support to vulnerable migrant and refugee populations, despite mobility restrictions.
- It also emphasizes the importance of utilizing digital tools and management expertise and large-scale volunteer mobilization to meet substantial needs in contexts with mass displacement.

2.2 Uninterrupted access to services

Populations on the move frequently experience disruptions to a wide range of essential services, while their needs intensify throughout the migration journey. Volunteers support the multisectoral needs of migrants and displaced individuals, helping to restore or protect continued access to critical services (see figure 4). Furthermore, volunteering often enables individuals to apply and grow their expertise, including in the fields of engineering, protection, medicine and education, while also creating opportunities for skills transfer.

FIGURE 4: Multisectoral support provided by volunteers



Healthcare

Migrants and displaced individuals frequently encounter a slew of health challenges, including nutritional deficiencies, physical injuries, and psychological distress, all while grappling with a lack of access to quality healthcare services. Barriers such as not having identity or legal status documents, facing high costs and experiencing discrimination can further hinder their ability to receive care. Even when healthcare services are available, they may not be tailored to meet the cultural, linguistic and social needs of these populations, which can lead to delays in diagnosis and treatment.⁴⁷

Volunteers significantly contribute to promoting migration-sensitive health systems, especially in areas such as nutrition, disease prevention, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), maternal and child health, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH). They can help reduce cost barriers and address staff shortages during emergencies. For instance, in Morocco, the National Council of Order Physicians and UNHCR have enabled private clinics to offer free consultations and treatments to refugees, addressing gaps in specialized care.⁴⁸

In recent years, international health volunteers' short-term engagements have expanded, particularly pre-health professionals and medical trainees, filling critical gaps by training local staff, and addressing shortages in medical services.⁴⁹ At the same time, local community health volunteers play an indispensable role reaching remote and underserved populations. Their proximity to affected communities gives them a deep understanding of local needs, enabling them to bridge language barriers and navigate cultural contexts with greater sensitivity than external medical professionals. By offering frontline care that complements formal medical systems,⁵⁰ these volunteers are integral to “decentralized models of care” employed by organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (see box 2).

BOX 2: Community healthcare workers responding to IDP needs – MSF, Cameroon

In 2020, in response to the acute health needs arising from the conflict-driven displacement of over 700,000 people in Cameroon's North-West and South-West regions, MSF collaborated with more than 100 community health volunteers in the towns of Mamfe and Kumba. Selected by local leaders and trained by MSF staff, these volunteers were instrumental in detecting and treating common health issues, including uncomplicated malaria, respiratory tract infections, malnutrition, and diarrhoea. For cases requiring advanced care, they referred patients to MSF-supported health facilities. Over the course of the year, MSF reported that these volunteers facilitated more than 150,000 free medical consultations across the affected regions.⁵¹

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Populations on the move often face significant barriers to accessing basic, safely managed water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services. Migrants traversing extreme routes, such as through the Sahara Desert or Darién Gap jungle, may endure severe water shortages, relying on unfiltered sources like rivers for drinking, and washing. Temporary or “unplanned” settlements often lack basic WASH services, with poor hygiene practices and open defecation heightening health risks. Formal camps, and detention centres also frequently face water management issues due to overcrowding and limited resources.⁵² In populated areas, challenges such as racism, discrimination and exclusion from certain services can further limit access.

Volunteers are frequently mobilized in sanitation and hygiene efforts in transit areas and host communities, such as IDP or refugee camps. They support community-led sanitation campaigns, conduct door-to-door encounters, and share best practices for preventing open defecation, distributing hygiene kits, and promoting safe handwashing, especially during disease outbreaks like COVID-19 and cholera. In IDP settings, volunteers also participate in WASH Management Committees, contributing to improved water management, monitoring water quality, and ensuring equitable access. Additionally, volunteers from the private sector, such as engineers, assist with infrastructure development in emergency settings, including the installation of water treatment systems (see box 3).

BOX 3: Volunteer engineers in the Veolia Foundation – Chad

The Veoliaforce skills sponsorship program, run by the Veolia Foundation, provides a unique solution for humanitarian action in refugee camps. Veolia employees volunteer their expertise on-site for several weeks during their working hours, undergo training in humanitarian response, assisting with the development and management of emergency sanitation solutions. In response to the civil war in Sudan, which displaced over 600,000 people into Chad by June 2024,⁵³ Veoliaforce partnered with UNHCR to audit a dozen camps near Farchana in eastern Chad, providing recommendations to improve water access.⁵⁴ In collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), mobile water treatment units were installed in two IDP-hosting communities, Baga Sola and Bol, with training provided to local personnel in drinking water production and monitoring.⁵⁵

Education

In humanitarian settings, particularly in regions experiencing high levels of migration and displacement, the challenges to education are significant.⁵⁶ One striking statistic reveals that about 49 per cent of refugee children worldwide — approximately 7.2 million — were not enrolled in school as of 2024.⁵⁷

To combat teacher shortages and keep education accessible, communities often turn to volunteer teachers. These individuals typically have limited skills or formal qualifications but are eager to contribute. They usually take on non-formal teaching roles on short-term contracts, often dealing with limited incentive payments and little structured support.⁵⁸ Additionally, displaced persons, refugees⁵⁹ and individuals from host communities frequently volunteer in schools and community learning centres, helping to fill important gaps, such as teaching language skills.⁶⁰

This localized approach not only helps address immediate teacher shortages but also creates career opportunities in displacement contexts. Initiatives in conflict-affected areas like Kachin State and Kayah State in Myanmar, as seen in the case study below, illustrate the potential of this strategy. However, to be effective, volunteer teaching programs require robust support and training structures, as well as pathways for career development.



CASE STUDY: Volunteer Teacher Training Centres in IDP camps, Myanmar

In Myanmar, an estimated 3.4 million people are internally displaced, according to the UNHCR.⁶¹ Decades of conflict, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup in 2021, have severely disrupted access to education, resulting in generational losses in learning. Approximately 30 per cent of the teaching workforce has joined the civil disobedience movement, leaving their positions.⁶² Ongoing conflict has also led to numerous attacks on schools and teaching personnel.⁶³ In areas not controlled by the government, access to education heavily relies on local initiatives, community efforts, and international donors.

The New Generation Teacher Training Center (NG-TTC) is a partnership between the Catholic Diocese of Myitkyina's Diocesan Commission for Education and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). This partnership addresses severe teacher shortages in Kachin State, Myanmar, by equipping volunteer teachers from conflict-affected communities with the skills needed to serve in local schools and IDP camps. Running from 2014-2022, NG-TTC took a comprehensive approach to teacher preparation that combined seven months of pre-service training, a two-month practicum in IDP camps, and two years of professional development for volunteer teachers.

This program assisted volunteers, a majority of whom are themselves displaced or live in conflict-affected areas, to provide quality education while filling critical gaps in the teaching workforce.⁶⁴ Volunteers gained essential skills such as lesson planning, student engagement strategies and child-centred teaching methods, which augmented their effectiveness and confidence as educators. The program also covered child protection and MHPSS, adapted for the needs of both students and teachers. Furthermore, it supported personal growth and career development, which is recognized by providing alumni with training certificates.⁶⁵

“Without volunteers, how can the children learn in our context? Millions cannot continue education in our country. Their contributions help vulnerable and displaced children to continue learning. It’s not just about education — it’s about protection and the children’s well-being.”

JRS Worker, Myanmar

With the military coup in 2021 and insecurity due to intensified fighting, along with funding challenges, the duration of the trainings was significantly reduced to only a few weeks in certain areas. Advocacy efforts surrounding the accreditation of volunteer teachers' experience and learning were interrupted. Nevertheless, JRS's activities have continued in Kayah State, supporting a total of 459 schools and learning spaces through its volunteer teachers programme.

Key takeaways

- Despite the operational challenges it faced, NG-TTC offers a replicable model that fortifies education systems in displacement-affected areas. This initiative's unique resilience and volunteer teachers' local knowledge has built a sustainable model that enriches both the educational landscape in Kachin and the lives of the volunteers themselves.
- Volunteer teachers gained valuable skills, confidence and career development through certifications, fostering long-term benefits for individuals and their communities.

Safety and Protection

Migration can often stem from a desire for safety and protection, yet it can also expose individuals to new risks, including violence, exploitation, abuse and other serious violations. An IOM, UNHCR and the Mixed Migration Centre 2024 report on the protection and abuse of migrants along routes in East and West Africa and the Mediterranean Coast found that 38 per cent of surveyed migrants and refugees perceived a risk of physical abuse, 18 per cent perceived a risk of kidnapping for ransom and 15 per cent perceived a risk of sexual violence.^v These abuses may occur at any stage: on the road, at border crossings or in detention centres.⁶⁶ Camp settings can also create protection risks, for instance risks of violence, SGBV and human trafficking. However, many migrants who endure such abuse fail to access protection systems.⁶⁷

Volunteers support essential protection services, addressing the urgent needs of those on the move. They contribute to preventing migrant deaths and disappearances, delivering life-saving humanitarian assistance such as search and rescue efforts, and restore access to protection systems. Many organizations use local volunteers to identify, monitor and provide referrals for migrant groups such as unaccompanied or separated children, survivors of SGBV, refugees and asylum seekers and trafficked persons.⁶⁸ They also help run safe spaces for women and children⁶⁹ in camps or transit centres for forcibly displaced persons, as well as in formal and informal settlements.⁷⁰ Efforts in Ethiopia provide one example (see box 4).

BOX 4: Refugee outreach volunteers in child protection, Ethiopia

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, around 30,000 refugees live outside camps. Refugee outreach volunteers (ROVs) familiar with refugees' cultural and social contexts, assist vulnerable groups such as older persons, individuals with disabilities, SGBV survivors, and LGBTIQ+ refugees. These volunteers play a crucial role in offering accurate information, raising awareness and connecting individuals with protection services. Selected transparently by UNHCR and the Agency for Refugee and Returnee Affairs, the 49 male and female ROVs receive incentives and focus on child protection, general protection and health. Their tasks include identifying and reporting protection risks, locating foster care for separated children, providing translation at medical facilities and accompanying individuals to legal or police services.⁷¹ To maintain high standards, ROVs receive training on principles like "Do No Harm," confidentiality, impartiality and inclusivity. They also undergo regular evaluations through monthly supervision and quarterly meetings.⁷²

Shelter and Infrastructure

Many populations on the move experience homelessness and inadequate shelter during their migration journeys. These risks do not disappear after migration; many asylum seekers, refugees, IDPs and migrants continue to face difficulties securing housing in their host communities due to barriers such as limited or overcrowded shelters, discrimination in the housing market or difficulty navigating administrative processes to secure independent housing.⁷³

v Author's calculations, based on the survey of 31,542 refugees and migrants, of which 11,973 reportedly perceived physical violence as a risk along the route, 5,756 perceived a risk of kidnapping for ransom, and 4,724 per cent perceived a risk of sexual violence. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2024.

Volunteers support these processes during transit and as part of more durable settlement efforts. Many volunteers contribute to planned relocation efforts during disasters,⁷⁴ work directly in transitional houses and temporary shelters and support the construction of temporary shelters.⁷⁵ In Latin America, migrant shelters, often referred to as *casa del migrante* (migrant's house), utilize national and international volunteers to welcome migrants, provide food and manage the facilities, offering temporary shelter to migrants before they continue their journey.⁷⁶

Over time, some of these shelters have transformed from short-term facilities for transit migrants into longer-term settlements where individuals are staying to lay claim to their rights.⁷⁷ Similarly, in situations of protracted internal displacement, such as in the case of Ukraine (see box 5), the role of volunteers may evolve as the needs of affected populations shift from immediate shelter to long-term integration, including housing, employment, services and infrastructure rebuilding.

BOX 5: Mobilizing volunteers for immediate and long-term recovery – Ukraine

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the need for shelter and infrastructure support surged across both Western and Central Ukraine. In response, the UNDP's Regional Development Programme, a part of the Inclusive Development, Recovery and Peacebuilding Portfolio, in partnership with UNV, mobilized a diverse group of community volunteers. Many of these volunteers had firsthand displacement experience and played a critical role in addressing gaps in local capacity, particularly in areas overwhelmed by internal displacement.

Fifty UN Community Volunteers supported local authorities by helping equip and manage temporary shelters, distributing humanitarian aid and collecting data on displaced persons' needs. Simultaneously, six UNV Experts, including engineers, were working on rebuilding critical infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals and water treatment plants — essential for sustaining recovery efforts under Quality assurance for UNITED24, DREAM and Kyiv Oblast Recovery initiatives. Reflecting on how the program's objectives shifted over time with evolving needs, from emergency response to longer term integration and rebuilding, Mustafa Sait-Ametov, Regional Development Programme Manager for UNDP in Ukraine, notes: "When the war broke out in 2022, there was an immediate need for temporary accommodation, but as the situation evolved, the focus shifted towards providing livelihood opportunities, access to services, legal support and reskilling."

2.3 Inclusive and gender-integrated responses

Migrants, refugees and IDPs, who face intersectional marginalization because of their gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, legal status or other relevant characteristics, face heightened challenges. For instance, UN Women research found SGBV nearly unavoidable, with 60–80 per cent of women and girls migrating through Mexico to the United States experiencing rape, rising to 90 per cent on the Mediterranean route to Italy.⁷⁸

Volunteering has the power to transform migration experiences and outcomes by fostering greater equality and inclusion and tackling dynamics of power, discrimination and societal inequalities that heighten the risks faced by migrants in challenging situations.

Youth and women's associations and organizations for persons with disabilities are key players in driving inclusive and gender-integrated responses to human mobility challenges. For instance, in response to the escalating violence in the Gaza Strip since 2023, Humanity & Inclusion has utilized a network of 300 volunteers who offer emergency assistance support to refugees and displaced persons with disabilities. Assistance has included providing rehabilitation services and supplies in the West Bank for injured persons displaced from Gaza.⁷⁹

There are also many documented examples of women volunteering to tackle gender-specific challenges arising from migration or displacement. The case study featuring UN Community Volunteer midwives in Mali, illustrates how volunteers can enrich emergency responses and support health systems by providing gender-specific SRH and SGBV services for women and girls.



CASE STUDY: Deployment of UN Community Volunteer midwives to support SRH/GBV services for displacement-affected communities in Mali

In Mali, years of conflict and displacement have profoundly disrupted access to essential healthcare services, including SRH and gender-based violence (GBV) services. As of late 2024, the country was hosting some 378,363 IDPs, more than half (58%) of whom were women and girls,⁸⁰ while an additional 123,044 persons were registered refugees from neighbouring countries.⁸¹

Conflict and displacement not only heighten the risks of SGBV, but also increase the urgent need for SRH and GBV services.⁸² Yet, access to these services is limited due to weakened health systems, worsened by attacks on healthcare facilities and the displacement of many healthcare workers.⁸³ Many women are forced to travel long distances to give birth or seek obstetrical and neonatal care. Mali's maternal and child mortality rates are among the highest in the world.⁸⁴

To meet their needs, the "Deployment of midwives in community settings" initiative was launched in 2021 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) within the framework of the 8th Mali/UNFPA cooperation program (CPD8 2020-2024), providing the Ministry of Health and Social Development with 203 community midwives who offer quality SRH/GBV services across Ségou, Sikasso, Mopti, Timbuktu, Gao and Menaka.⁸⁵ In the first year of the project, 50 UN Community Volunteer midwives were recruited in community health centres primarily located in humanitarian zones, including IDP and refugee camps. These volunteer midwives offered support with family planning, prenatal and postnatal care and improved the quality of prevention and management of GBV cases.⁸⁶ In some cases, they even assisted the GBV sub-cluster in carrying out rapid needs assessments after new waves of displacement.

"Community midwives are often the first point of contact with communities. People may not seek help specifically for GBV issues, but they do seek assistance for matters like contraception. This makes them a crucial entry point."

Margot Dupé, Gender and Youth Specialist, UN Volunteer for UNFPA Mali

Many volunteer midwives also contributed to awareness-raising efforts in IDP communities on topics such as GBV prevention and services and menstrual hygiene promotion and helped challenge harmful gender stereotypes and cultural practices.

"In my exchanges with these women during my supervision missions, they gain a better understanding of menstrual hygiene and learn that they don't have to isolate themselves during their periods. We explain that they can access family planning methods without necessarily waiting for their husband's consent."

Sira Ballo, Community Midwives Coordinator, UN Volunteer for UNFPA Mali

In a subsequent stage of the project, in March 2022, 36 UN Community Volunteer midwives opted to continue their placements in health centres, allowing them to transition into employment contracts with community health associations and continue their activities. An additional 164 midwives were contracted by community health associations, with financial support from UNFPA. This transition was viewed as essential for the sustainability of the intervention and for sustaining Mali's health systems in the long term.

Key takeaways

- UN Community Volunteer midwives provided quality SRH/GBV services in displacement-affected communities, addressing critical access barriers and service provision limitations faced by IDPs and refugees, particularly women and girls.
- The project exemplifies the importance of combining humanitarian action with strategies for long-term health system stability and providing continuity through employment contracts.

2.4 Preparing for and reducing displacement

Disaster-induced displacement, increasingly driven by the climate crisis, affects some 24 million people annually, with the biggest impacts felt in low- and middle-income countries.^{vi} The repeated losses from disasters not only devastate communities but also erode governments' capacity to invest in and achieve the SDGs.⁸⁷ Since most disaster-related displacement occurs within national borders, affected countries also tend to bear a disproportionate burden in managing the responses to this displacement.⁸⁸

Emergency preparedness, including anticipatory action, can reduce the disruptive impacts of displacement and even shorten its duration. Volunteers, especially at the community level, are vital in minimizing the risks of displacement and supporting climate adaptation efforts that tackle its root causes. When displacement is unavoidable, volunteers assist with safe relocation and evacuation, ensuring that the process is managed with dignity, protecting human rights and reducing additional security risks⁸⁹ (see table 1).

TABLE 1: Examples of volunteer-involving Disaster Risk Reduction responses and anticipatory action

<p>Planned relocation</p>	<p>In Indonesia, the Sister Village Program was launched in 2011 by the Regional Agency for Disaster Management and UNDP after the eruption of Mount Merapi. It builds on traditional kinship-based cooperation to prepare for evacuations, by pairing high-risk villages with “buffer” villages. Community volunteers are actively involved in resource mapping, village-level planning and budgeting. A diverse range of groups, including farmers, artisans, women, youth, older persons and people with disabilities, participate in these efforts. Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Platforms linking sister villages have successfully issued alerts and mobilized volunteers during several subsequent evacuations in the region. By 2020, the program had expanded to encompass 20 districts.⁹⁰</p>
<p>Reduce displacement drivers</p>	<p>In Bangladesh, 44 UN Community Volunteers support climate adaptation and resilience through the Local Government Initiative on Climate Change project. Operating in the landslide-prone Chattogram Hill Tracts, they have helped 7,500 individuals open mobile bank accounts and design climate-resilient business plans. These efforts address drivers of displacement by strengthening economic stability and reducing vulnerability to climate-related shocks.⁹¹</p>
<p>Early warning and anticipatory action</p>	<p>At refugee camps in Maban, South Sudan, where seasonal flooding often leads to secondary displacement of refugees and returnees, community members are taking the lead in flood preparedness and anticipatory action with support from UNHCR, WFP, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other humanitarian partners. Volunteers from both refugee and host communities have built dikes and drainage channels, participated in reforestation projects, prepositioned medical supplies and launched early warning systems and information-sharing networks to help reduce the risk of displacement.⁹²</p>

vi Estimates are from the period 2008 to 2018. See: IDMC 2019.

Support during displacement crises often comes from informal, community-based structures. Host communities are usually the first responders in a displacement situation, especially when it happens suddenly, before government or humanitarian resources can be mobilized. This support is often motivated by personal connections and the generosity of community members.⁹³ However, governments and international aid actors are increasingly integrating local volunteer action into broader DRR strategies. This includes planned relocation, early warning systems, anticipatory action and climate resilience programs that directly address the root causes of migration and displacement.

As these examples illustrate, collaborations between national governments, external actors and community-led volunteer initiatives support the localization objectives of the 2030 Agenda. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 echoes this by urging governments to involve volunteers, alongside other stakeholders, in designing disaster risk policies, plans and standards as part of a people-centred, whole-of-society approach.⁹⁴ Such partnerships strengthen local communities by providing additional financial, technical and human resources, while also supporting the participation of displaced communities. They also augment the capacity of local volunteers to safely operate in high-risk environments, by connecting them with larger risk-sharing systems.⁹⁵

2.5 Achieving durable solutions

Volunteers play a vital role in supporting IDPs, refugees and migrants to access safe, legal and orderly migration pathways and broader integration processes that are critical to the achievement of durable solutions. When migrants' rights are restored and they no longer face discrimination or require specific assistance or protection, they can thrive as active, valued members of society.⁹⁶

Accessing complementary pathways

The growing disparity between the refugee resettlement needs and available places is becoming increasingly urgent. UNHCR estimates that 2.9 million refugees will need resettlement in 2025, an increase of half a million compared to 2024. This reality means that many refugees will wait more than two years for resettlement.⁹⁷

Sponsorship, a key complementary pathway, is recognized in the GCR for its importance in providing refugees with durable solutions, particularly when traditional resettlement programs are limited.⁹⁸ Many initiatives combine sponsorship with volunteering, as individual and community sponsors donate their time, expertise, and resources to support the successful integration of sponsored families. For instance, the Student Refugee Program (SRP) in Canada, run by the World University Service of Canada (WUSC), combines private sponsorship with opportunities for higher education to support refugee youth. The SRP brings over 130 refugee students annually to study in Canada as permanent residents. The program partners with WUSC Local Committees across over 95 post-secondary institutions, enlisting the support of over 1,000 student volunteers and alumni in peer-to-peer sponsorship and integration assistance. The volunteers provide remote and in-person coaching and peer mentorship, and help refugees navigate the Canadian education system.⁹⁹

Another valuable way volunteers contribute to complementary pathways is by supporting family reunification. Programs like the IFRC's Reunification Pathways for Integration (REPAIR) project, active in Austria, France, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, illustrate how individual follow-up support can facilitate family reunion cases, further improving the possibilities for refugees to rebuild their lives together.¹⁰⁰

Sustainable (re)integration

Volunteers play a vital role in many aspects of integration or reintegration, from offering mentorship, helping with job searches, re-skilling, finding housing, facilitating access to social services and guiding migrants through legal and administrative processes. They also connect migrants with their new communities through arts, sports and cultural activities, fostering peace, social cohesion, inclusivity and a strong sense of belonging.¹⁰¹ These efforts not only help migrants settle in new communities and achieve self-sufficiency but also create conditions for solidarity and trust between migrants and host communities.¹⁰²

Mentorship and community matching programs are initiatives where local mentors, many times volunteers, accompany refugees and newcomers when they first arrive in host countries, helping with cultural and social orientation, adapting to a new language and navigating various other aspects of life in their new communities. Several large-scale mentorship programs are run by the Red Cross and the Danish Refugee Council in Denmark and Norway,¹⁰³ as well as through joint government and NGO efforts in Italy¹⁰⁴ (see box 6).

BOX 6: Supporting integration through sports, art and cultural exchange in Europe

SINGA, a grassroots initiative launched in France and now active in several European countries (Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Belgium and the United Kingdom), connects migrants, refugees and local residents through shared activities like sports, arts, food, music and language exchange. Rather than positioning migrants and refugees solely as recipients of support, the organization encourages them to actively participate as contributors and co-leaders in various projects. By extension, the SINGA projects do not differentiate between volunteers and beneficiaries, instead focusing on all participants being members of the community. By focusing on mutual interests, SINGA fosters dialogue, challenges negative perceptions and stereotypes and enriches cultural understanding within communities. In Belgium, SINGA's efforts have led to the organization of over 1,300 events, providing opportunities for participants to acquire new skills while forming lasting connections. SINGA prioritizes collaborative leadership and equal participation. The organization supports refugees and migrants as they shape the social fabric of their new communities and encourages integration and social cohesion through genuine participation in these projects.¹⁰⁵

Many migrants face homelessness and inadequate housing during and after their journeys, with barriers such as overcrowded shelters, discrimination and complex administrative processes.¹⁰⁶ Housing assistance supports integration and has even been shown to improve early employment outcomes for refugees.¹⁰⁷

Volunteers are often involved in resettlement efforts by assisting with transitions from camps to housing, facilitating access to social housing, mediating with landlords,¹⁰⁸ providing emergency financial aid and refurbishing dwellings. In Canada, volunteers and community sponsors help refugee families overcome housing challenges through their social networks, local market knowledge and financial resources.¹⁰⁹

Volunteers contribute in various ways to inform migrants about their rights and the means to access them. They provide critical information on legal pathways, support migrants through regularization processes, assist with asylum applications and offer accompaniment to navigate complex administrative procedures such as civil documentation and residency. Pro bono lawyers and paralegals collaborate with various stakeholders — government agencies, law firms, NGOs, university clinics and bar associations — to provide critical services to migrants facing challenges like cost, information gaps and language barriers.¹¹⁰ The case study from INTERSOS in Lebanon below illustrates the potential for volunteers to expand their reach in assisting migrants through the digitalization of legal aid services.

CASE STUDY: Enhancing Legal Assistance to Refugees in Lebanon

In late 2024, the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Lebanon led to widespread destruction, significant loss of life, and the displacement of around 770,000 people, including Lebanese citizens and Syrian and Palestinian refugees. Among the displaced populations, legal challenges such as civil documentation, housing rights and statelessness have further exacerbated vulnerabilities.¹¹¹ Many migrants, IDPs and refugees require legal assistance to replace lost identification documentation or navigate new registration, residency and work permit processes to sustainably integrate into their host communities.

In Lebanon, the INGO INTERSOS leverages volunteering to provide tailored legal support to migrants, refugees, internally displaced communities and stateless persons, combining local outreach activities with legal professional expertise to maximize impact. Over 100 outreach volunteers disseminate legal information on topics like processes for birth registration and civil documentation and safely identify and refer more complex cases to the legal team. Specialized paralegal volunteers, many of whom are refugees with legal experience, also provide support in safely identifying and referring persons of concern to obtain birth or marriage registration, residency and other processes within civil and religious courts.¹¹²

Additionally, INTERSOS operates a Legal Help Desk within the UNHCR office and in INTERSOS Community Development Centres, staffed by a legal assistant and legal outreach volunteer. This desk provides legal information and assistance in addition to a telephone hotline for sharing information on legal rights and services, linking refugees and IDPs to tailored support.

“Volunteering is giving refugees valuable experience and a modest incentive to sustain themselves in their host communities. They also become trusted and valued figures within their communities because of the expertise and information they share.”

Roy Koberci, Deputy Protection Coordinator, INTERSOS Lebanon

In response to the movement restrictions and intermittent closure of public institutions and courts during the COVID-19 pandemic, the INTERSOS Bekaa Legal Team launched a Mobile Unit in 2020 to support continued access to legal assistance. From August–December 2020, the Mobile Unit, staffed by legal assistants and outreach volunteers, conducted 75 visits to informal settlement areas, providing counselling, delivering documents, sharing legal information via megaphones and leaflets, and conducting awareness sessions. This effort supported 653 Syrians with awareness sessions and individual counselling, 346 were assisted with civil documentation and other issues and 380 individuals successfully obtained their documents.¹¹³

Looking ahead, INTERSOS is exploring using mobile units in hard-to-reach areas and collective shelters hosting IDPs where private spaces are limited. This approach complements their hybrid strategy, addressing confidentiality concerns while maintaining accessibility for vulnerable populations.

Key takeaways

- By building community legal volunteers and paralegal teams within refugee communities, INTERSOS not only extends assistance, but also encourages community members, refugees and IDPs to take active roles in supporting their peers.
- Adapted for COVID-19, the Mobile Unit model demonstrates the value of volunteers in supporting integration processes through hybridized legal assistance.

Volunteers have also proved helpful in scaling up capacity to process refugee registration and regularization processes, a key steppingstone to successful integration, as illustrated in the example from Ecuador (see box 7).

BOX 7: Scaling-up refugee registration and regularization in Ecuador

In August 2022, responding to the significant influx of Venezuelan refugees with irregular migratory status, Ecuador launched an extensive registration and regularization initiative to guarantee access to rights and legal documentation and to support their socioeconomic integration. The initiative was implemented with the technical support of the IOM and UNHCR. It involved the service of 86 National UN Volunteers across three key ministries: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Socioeconomic Inclusion and various humanitarian organizations. The UNV program played a crucial role in supporting this large-scale registration process. The sustained technical assistance provided by UNV over a two-year period facilitated the registration of 259,000 individuals, of whom 201,708 received certificates of permanence, 92,400 obtained visas, and 72,000 were issued identification documents. This effort not only supported access to rights for the migrant population but also contributed to their stability and integration into host communities. As noted by Nicole King, UNV Country Coordinator in Ecuador: “This gives them the possibility to access dignified opportunities, get a legal contract and ask for protections, while also reducing their risks of labour exploitation and abuse.” The initiative is notable for being one of the largest mobilizations of humanitarian support in the region, involving both humanitarian organizations and coordination with multiple government ministries.

Migrants’ participation in local community volunteering not only enriches community development but also plays a role in their social integration. In refugee and displacement settlements, programs encouraging migrants to volunteer — such as teaching language classes, organizing community events or helping fellow displaced individuals — foster a sense of agency, programmatic ownership and belonging.

In environments with mixed migration movements and where groups of individuals with differing languages, ethnicities and cultural and religious backgrounds coexist, these volunteering opportunities can be a source of solidarity and mutual understanding.

However, creating adequate protections and a supportive policy and legal environment is necessary to make certain migrant volunteering occurs under the best circumstances, minimizing risks of increased precarity and vulnerability to exploitation (see section 3.3). Adequate funding from governments and international aid actors is also needed to guarantee the quality of support provided, and to evaluate integration outcomes.¹¹⁴ Thus, migrant integration policies need to acknowledge and adequately support the volunteers’ role in building inclusive communities.

3. INTEGRATING VOLUNTEERING IN MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

3.1 Volunteering in international normative frameworks and forums on migration

Volunteers and volunteer-involving organizations have a critical role to play in promoting migration as a tool for sustainable development. This is reflected in various international normative frameworks and forums, as discussed below (see table 2).

These frameworks not only recognize how volunteering supports the 2030 Agenda and, by extension, SDG target 10.7 on safe, orderly and responsible migration, but also how migrants, IDPs and refugees themselves can and should exercise their right to freedom of association by participating in volunteering initiatives. Initiatives include those offering migrant assistance, as well as in consultative processes relating to migration governance.

TABLE 2: International frameworks on volunteering and human mobility

United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolutions
<p>UNGA resolution 67/138 (2012) “Integrating volunteering in the next decade” reaffirms the need “to encourage volunteerism in all its forms, which contributes significantly to the cohesiveness and the well-being of communities and of societies as a whole” and “involves and benefits all segments of society, especially women, children, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, minorities, migrants and those who remain excluded for social or economic reasons.”¹¹⁵</p>
<p>UNGA resolution 70/129 (2015), “Encourages Governments, in partnership with United Nations entities, volunteer-involving organizations, the private sector, civil society, including academia, and other stakeholders, to integrate volunteerism into national development strategies, plans and policies, United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks and “One United Nations” plans.”¹¹⁶</p>
<p>UNGA resolution 79/148 (2024) “Strengthening volunteerism for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, leaving no one behind,” encourages “the meaningful participation and integration of all people, including youth, older persons, women, migrants, refugees, persons with disabilities, minorities and other marginalized groups, into volunteer-involving programmes and projects, with the provision of the appropriate means to leverage the full potential of volunteerism.”¹¹⁷</p>
Global Compact on Refugees
<p>The GCR (2018) does not make explicit reference to volunteering. However, it does mention the importance of engaging faith-based organizations and civil society organizations, including those led by refugees, in consultations and in the design of appropriate, accessible and inclusive responses (paragraphs 34 and 40) (A/73/12, Part II). This may be interpreted to include volunteer-involving initiatives.¹¹⁸</p>

TABLE 2: Continued

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

Objective 16, paragraph 32 of the GCM (2018) commits “to foster inclusive and cohesive societies by empowering migrants to become active members of society and promoting the reciprocal engagement of receiving communities and migrants in the exercise of their rights and obligations towards each other.” This includes supporting “multicultural activities through sports, music, arts, culinary festivals, volunteering and other social events” that will help sustain mutual understanding and appreciation between migrant and destination communities.” (A/RES/73/195)¹¹⁹

Key global migration forums: the GFMD and IMRF

Volunteers can contribute significantly to shaping migration policy and governance at various levels: by promoting human mobility based on principles of dignity and human rights and by informing and driving social activism that influences migration governance and management.¹²⁰

At the global level, international forums for migration governance are increasingly providing space and opportunity for volunteer-involving organizations to speak up on migration issues. For instance, the Global Forum on Migration & Development (GFMD), though a state-led forum, opened sessions to civil society delegates, the private sector, local governments and youth during its 14th Summit in 2024.¹²¹ The Migration Youth Forum, held alongside the GFMD, brings together a variety of youth from CSOs, volunteer work, academia and local and national governments to create awareness of urgent issues related to migration and displacement.¹²²

The International Migration Review Forum (IMRF), launched for the first time in 2022 and taking place every four years, serves as the primary intergovernmental global platform on the GCM. Various volunteer-involving organizations contribute to these processes. The Civil Society Action Committee, which is co-convened by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, the NGO Committee on Migration and the International Catholic Migration Commission, notably participates in the IMRF through “preparatory meetings, global civil society consultations, policy dialogues, and advocacy, within civil society but also with Member States and other relevant stakeholders.”¹²³

Young people, including migrants, also donate their time to IMRF processes as part of the UN Major Group for Children and Youth (UN MGCY), a volunteer organization and the mandated, self-organized space for children and youth (aged 0-30), to meaningfully participate in UN negotiation spaces. Furthermore, UN MGCY volunteers are also active in leading consultations with youth-led and youth-focused organizations in preparation of GCM reviews.¹²⁴

3.2 Volunteering and migration in national strategies, plans and policies

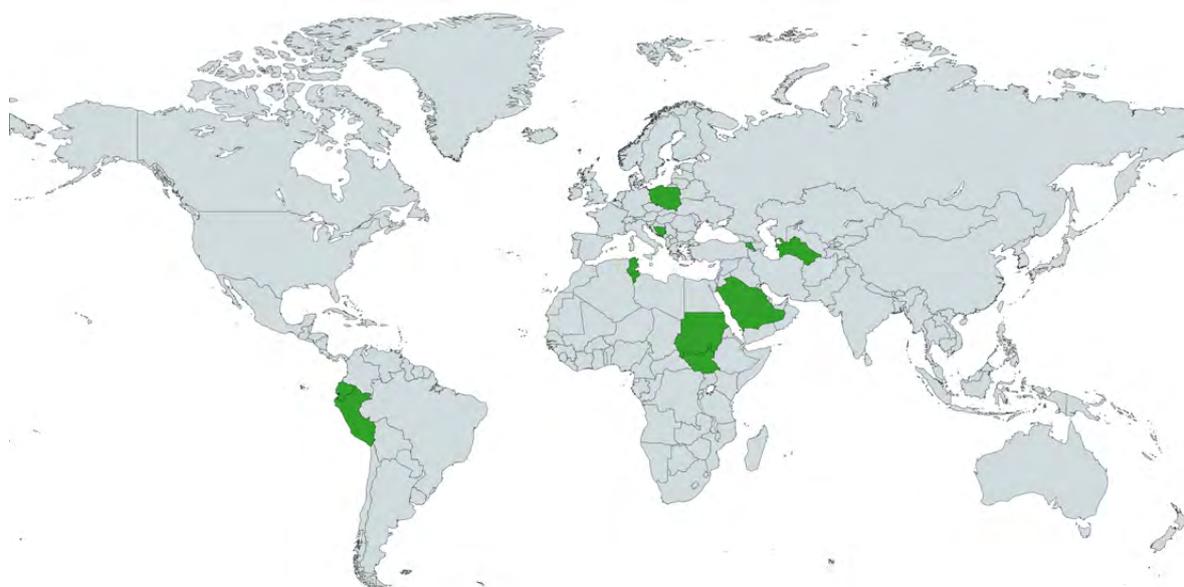
Volunteers need an enabling policy environment that supports and protects volunteer practices in migration management and humanitarian assistance. To assess the extent to which governments have integrated volunteering by and for migrants into national development strategies, plans and policies, this study examined references to volunteering and migration in VNRs, UNSDCF's and United Nations agencies' country programme documents. It also examined references to volunteering in voluntary GCM reviews, and through pledges and initiatives submitted to the good practices database on the implementation of the GCR.

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

Follow-up and review mechanisms, such as the VNRs, monitor progress toward the 2030 Agenda and share experiences, successes, challenges and lessons learned.^{vii} A review of VNRs in 2024 by UNV notes that 23 out of 36 countries have mentioned volunteering in their VNRs on their SDG progress, while 11 out of 36 countries have reported on the integration of volunteering into development plans, policies and strategies in their VNRs.¹²⁵

Reviewing VNRs submitted between 2021-2024, several VNRs explicitly mentioned examples of volunteers contributing to the support of migrants, refugees and IDPs (among others): providing humanitarian assistance (Saudi Arabia, 2023¹²⁶; Poland, 2023¹²⁷), protection (South Sudan, 2024¹²⁸), food (Tunisia, 2021¹²⁹), registration and regularization processes (Armenia, 2024¹³⁰; Ecuador, 2024¹³¹), healthcare services (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023¹³²) including maternal health (Burkina Faso, 2023¹³³), first aid and psychological support (Armenia, 2024¹³⁴), teaching support (Sudan, 2022¹³⁵), DRR (Armenia, 2024¹³⁶; Fiji, 2023¹³⁷; Peru, 2024¹³⁸), housing and emergency shelter (Peru, 2024¹³⁹), regular pathways and the prevention of human trafficking (Turkmenistan, 2023¹⁴⁰) (see figure 5).

FIGURE 5: Countries that reference volunteering in relation to migration and displacement assistance in their VNRs (2021-2024)



Source: MapChart. Map created by the author.

vii VNRs "aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The VNRs also seek to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals." High-level Political Forum (HLPF) (n.d.), "Voluntary National Reviews" <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs>. Accessed 3 February 2025.

UNSDCFs and United Nations agencies' country-level programming documents

In the 2024 implementation cycle, 10 out of 17 countries have integrated volunteering into UNSDCF, and five out of 17 into UNSDCF^{viii} Results and Reporting Frameworks.¹⁴¹ References to volunteering in relation to migration and displacement are implicitly made, through links to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. For instance, Egypt's 2023-2027 UNSDCF notes that the UN will partner with the Government of Egypt, "volunteer involving organizations, and other stakeholders to identify and consolidate cross-sector migration data and evidence-based information to document and promote migration-related SDG achievements."¹⁴²

Some direct references relate to community health workers and awareness-raising campaigns (Tanzania, 2022-2027¹⁴³), the role of volunteers in disaster risk reduction (Cambodia, 2024-2028¹⁴⁴; Nepal, 2023-2027¹⁴⁵; Tajikistan, 2023-2026¹⁴⁶), data and evidence consolidation on migration (Egypt, 2023-2027¹⁴⁷), durable solutions (Iran, 2023-2027¹⁴⁸), IDP integration (Ukraine, 2022-2023¹⁴⁹) and volunteer opportunities for displaced populations (Zambia, 2023-2027¹⁵⁰).

Very few UN agencies' Country Programme Documents (CPDs) directly mention volunteers and volunteering in the context of human mobility. India's CPD for UNDP (2023-2027) notes the role of volunteering schemes as part of capacity-building efforts for local youth, migrants, and women "to revitalize local farm and non-farm value chains"¹⁵¹. Albania's CPD for UNDP (2022-2026) commits to support civil society organizations representing migrants and refugees (among other minority groups) that "promote participation, human rights, social cohesion and volunteerism."¹⁵²

UNHCR stands out for its specific integration of volunteering in country-level programming, with at least 19 active Multi-Year Strategy documents^{ix} directly referencing volunteering, primarily in relation to refugee and host community outreach volunteers. Other references relate to refugee UN Volunteers (Mali 2023-2026¹⁵³), and the use of volunteers in protection activities (Lebanon 2023-2025¹⁵⁴, Zambia 2025-2028¹⁵⁵).

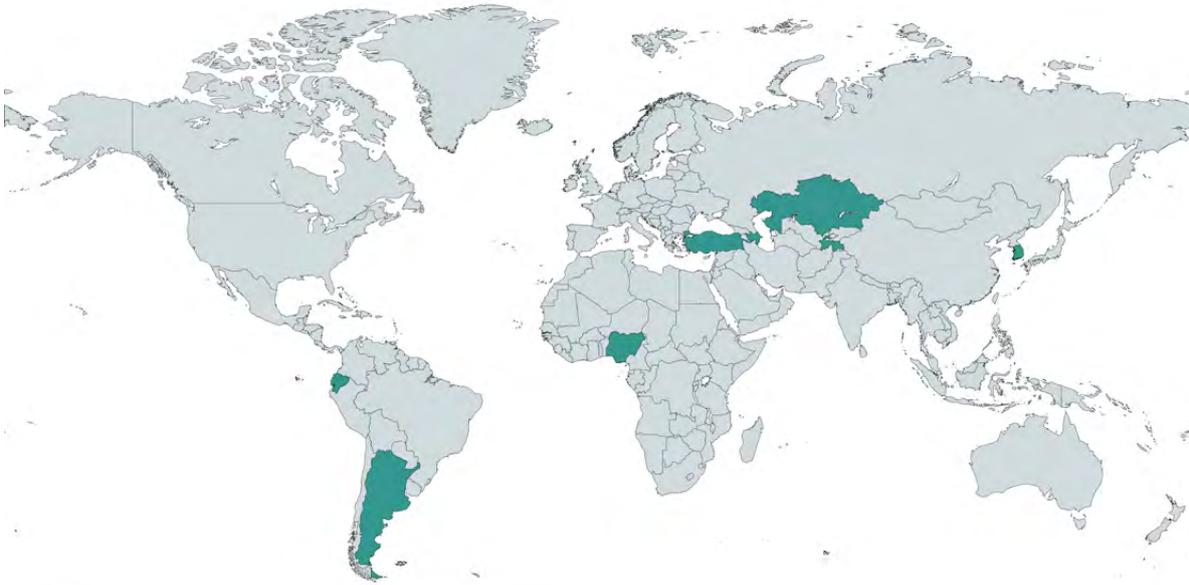
GCM: regional reviews, Member States' voluntary reviews and national implementation plans

Voluntary GCM reviews are submitted by Member States to assess the implementation status of the GCM. A review of key search terms referencing volunteering and volunteers was conducted on available voluntary GCM reviews, regional reviews and national implementation plans. Few reporting documents specifically mentioned volunteers directly, although it should be noted that references to civil society organizations and community-based approaches were far more frequent.

Of the 61 Member States that have submitted GCM reviews, only nine (15%) make direct reference to volunteers' and volunteer-involving organizations' contributions to migrant and refugee support and assistance.¹⁵⁶ Several Member States mention volunteering in relation to key GCM principles, for instance as key stakeholders in whole-of-society approaches (Republic of Korea¹⁵⁷ and Azerbaijan¹⁵⁸). Nigeria notes the involvement of the Nigerian National Volunteer Service in multi-stakeholder consultations as part of its GCM review process.¹⁵⁹ Turkey applauds voluntary efforts of the Turkish Red Crescent, notably through its Community Centres, to support migrant integration and social cohesion¹⁶⁰ (see figure 6).

viii Previously termed United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs), UNSDCF are "the most important instrument for planning and implementation of the UN development activities at country level in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda)." See: UNSDG (2019) "United Nations Sustainable Development Operation Framework. Internal Guidance. <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/UN%20Cooperation%20Framework%20Internal%20Guidance%20-%20June%202022.pdf>

ix These include: Afghanistan (2025-2027), Algeria (2025-2027), Colombia (2023-2026), Indonesia (2023-2025), Jordan (2023-2025), Kenya (2023-2026), Lebanon (2023-2025), Libya (2023-2025), Malaysia (2025-2027), Mali (2023-2026), Mexico (2025-2027), Myanmar (2025-2027), Mauritania (2024-2026), Niger (2023-2025), Pakistan (2025-2027), Sudan (2023-2025), Syria (2023-2025), Turkey (2023-2025) and Zambia (2025-2028). See: UNHCR, (n.d.b.) "Country operations". Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations>. Accessed 1 February 2025.

FIGURE 6: Countries that reference volunteers and volunteering in national GCM reviews

Source: MapChart. Map created by the author.

Both Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan's national GCM reviews stress the role of volunteers in raising awareness around migration. Azerbaijan's Migration Volunteers Public Union involves youth in raising awareness on migration and in fostering social assistance projects.¹⁶¹ In Kazakhstan, volunteers focus on migration and displacement drivers, conducting training seminars, organizing round tables and other activities to encourage disaster awareness and preparedness.¹⁶² Ecuador's national GCM review notes that the temporary visitor visa enables foreigners to enter the country for the purpose of carrying out volunteer work, among other activities.¹⁶³

Member States' GCM reviews also recognize the role of volunteers in the preparation and response to the humanitarian needs of migrants, including medical services (Nigeria¹⁶⁴), restoring family links for displaced populations (Gambia¹⁶⁵), searching for missing migrants (Tajikistan¹⁶⁶) and providing integration support (Argentina¹⁶⁷). The Korean Immigration & Integration Programme features a Mentoring Volunteers program, encouraging migrants to volunteer by assisting newcomers and delivering lectures to Korean nationals, fostering greater cultural diversity awareness.¹⁶⁸

Volunteering is only mentioned in one regional review, that of the Member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), which notably emphasizes concern for the criminalization of volunteers who provide life-saving assistance at external borders.¹⁶⁹

GCR: pledges and good practices

While the GCR does not explicitly reference the engagement of volunteers or volunteer-involving organizations, reporting on the GCR focuses on the critical role volunteers play in its implementation

Since the first Global Refugee Forum in 2019, key stakeholders, including States and non-state actors, have been making voluntary pledges and submitting initiatives to the good practices database on the implementation of the GCR. Between 2019 and 2024, a total of 66 pledges explicitly referenced volunteers, volunteering and/or volunteer-involving organizations.¹⁷⁰ Additionally, the good practices database lists 91 diverse projects and initiatives that include the involvement of volunteers.¹⁷¹

The challenge of shrinking civic space for refugee and migrant humanitarian assistance

While many governments recognize the critical role of volunteering in assisting migrants and refugees and make positive reference to these efforts in national development strategies, plans and policies, it is important to consider other factors that contribute to a supportive and protective environment for volunteering.

Volunteers offering humanitarian assistance to migrants and refugees face significant risks and challenges, including threats to their personal safety and well-being. Studies have shown that the emotional and physical strain of volunteering in emergency and disaster settings can lead to high rates of attrition and burnout.¹⁷² In areas affected by armed conflict, volunteers, like other humanitarian workers, may be caught in the crossfire, facing direct threats or becoming unintended targets of violence. Attacks on civilian infrastructure, such as homes, schools and hospitals, which violate international law, further place volunteers' lives at risk.

Some volunteers, particularly in Europe, have also faced criminal charges and detention for their efforts, such as having their support labelled as “migrant smuggling,”¹⁷³ as well as non-judicial harassment for standing in solidarity with migrants.¹⁷⁴ Documented cases include the targeting of volunteers involved in search and rescue operations at sea,¹⁷⁵ as well as those offering rides or temporary shelter to migrants.¹⁷⁶ The term “shrinking civic space” has emerged in academic and policy discourse to describe the challenges that humanitarian actors face for delivering principled humanitarian aid,¹⁷⁷ and that civil society actors face in meaningfully participating in “the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies” and contributing their voice to policy and decision-making processes.¹⁷⁸

The lack of clear policy frameworks and protections for volunteers involved in humanitarian assistance exacerbates these difficulties. Conversely, overly formalized regulations can discourage volunteer participation, creating a chilling effect. It is critically important that the urgent need for supportive policies and practices not only protect volunteers but also acknowledge their critical contributions to sustainable development and the protection of migrants' human rights, including migrants who themselves volunteer.

3.3 Harnessing the potential of migrant volunteering

Migrant volunteering represents a powerful avenue for fostering community resilience and addressing challenges in migration contexts. Migrants and refugees who volunteer bring important benefits to the sector by contributing their expertise, social, linguistic and cultural insights. They participate in skills transfer and broaden organizational capacities by contributing diverse perspectives,¹⁷⁹ challenging the narrative that volunteering is something done for refugees, rather than with them.¹⁸⁰

Volunteering is increasingly recognized as a valuable pathway for migrants and refugees to gain work experience, build confidence and create social networks, which can improve their future job prospects. It can also serve as a valuable stepping stone for overcoming issues related to the non-recognition of their work or educational experiences, or for those with limited experience in their host country.¹⁸¹ Some research indicates volunteering can be a means for migrants and refugees to remain active while looking for work or awaiting the processing of asylum, visa or residency requests, and it may even strengthen their applications¹⁸² (see box 8.)

BOX 8: Facilitating education-to-workforce transitions for refugees – West Africa

In Senegal, Ghana, Niger and Nigeria, UNV and UNHCR, with funding from Germany, are working to provide employment opportunities to graduates of the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) scholarship program, which provides refugees access to higher education in countries of asylum and supports education-to-workforce transitions. Since 2018, 22 DAFI graduates served as UN Volunteers with entities such as IOM, UNDP, UNICEF and UN Women. The program offers these graduates professional development opportunities in a range of fields, including communications, public relations, inclusive finance, governance and women’s political participation. Furthermore, it supports refugees as they contribute their unique backgrounds and perspectives to help achieve the SDGs.¹⁸³

However, the extent to which migrants and refugees can volunteer, as well as the conditions under which they do so, largely depends on the presence of an inclusive and protective volunteering environment, with supportive legal and policy frameworks.

Many migrants and refugees face barriers to accessing formal volunteering opportunities, similar to challenges they face in the labour market: a lack of local work experience, language proficiency,¹⁸⁴ discrimination and racism,¹⁸⁵ as well as insufficient finances for transportation and childcare.¹⁸⁶ Legal restrictions on asylum seekers or undocumented migrants, including some laws intended to prevent exploitation and forced labour, can limit their access to volunteer opportunities. For instance, in the Netherlands, organizations must obtain formal declarations to involve asylum seekers in voluntary work; the work must be unpaid and of clear social value.¹⁸⁷

Lack of awareness about existing opportunities is another recurrent barrier. As the Network for Dialogue (2022) cautions, “for asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants, there is uncertainty and anxiety about their future in these local communities, and fear that engagement will result in deportation,”¹⁸⁸ which can discourage their involvement, even where volunteering is permitted.

In some cases, access to volunteering may also become exclusive, favouring individuals with specific skills or backgrounds and excluding others. It is important to intentionally align volunteering frameworks with inclusive participation principles. This can be achieved by recruiting volunteers from disadvantaged backgrounds, in line with the principles of equality and non-discrimination and the commitment to “leave no one behind.” Furthermore, emerging best practices emphasize the importance of formally acknowledging volunteers’ contributions through certificates, endorsements or professional development programs while supporting volunteers’ opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Volunteering as a livelihood

The involvement of refugees and displaced persons in volunteering has important implications, especially when compensation is involved, such as per diems or incentives. Findings from the Refugee Youth Volunteering in Uganda (RYVU) research project,^x which surveyed 3,053 young refugees, indicate the strong connection between volunteering and livelihoods in displacement contexts. Approximately 70% of young refugees in Uganda volunteer, with many coming from households living below the international poverty line. Notably, half of the respondents reported earning part or all their income through their volunteering activities.¹⁸⁹

x This study was supported by the UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [Grant number: ES/S005439/1, “Skills acquisition and employability through volunteering by displaced youth in Uganda”] <https://www.rvu.org/>. Accessed 3 February 2025.

“Volunteering in the context of displacement cannot be detached from the debate about livelihoods and the ways in which people survive and cope. The whole humanitarian system plays a role in facilitating or not their access to paid opportunities.”

Dr. Bianca Fadel, RYVU Researcher and Research Fellow at Northumbria University

Without adequate planning, duty of care and oversight, volunteering can inadvertently reinforce social precarity and inequity. For those who volunteer, there is a risk of exploitation, as volunteering can sometimes be a “smokescreen” to disguise cheap or unpaid labour.¹⁹⁰ There is also the risk of volunteers becoming financially dependent on these opportunities, leaving them heavily impacted when roles change or interventions come to an end.¹⁹¹

Some countries have adopted policies to formalize the role of migrant volunteering in humanitarian responses (see box 9). However, there is currently very little recognition among governments and organizations that refugees and displaced persons significantly participate in volunteering, or how volunteering impacts livelihoods. It is therefore critical that volunteering policies and programs endeavour to not exacerbate precarity amongst displaced and refugee communities.

BOX 9: Formalizing migrant volunteering in Bangladesh’s humanitarian response

In Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees^{xi} volunteering, as a strategy to mitigate the impacts of large-scale displacement, is recognized in national policies and the Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis.¹⁹² The Government of Bangladesh has taken steps to formalize refugee-led volunteer programs, integrating them with skills development and livelihood support initiatives. In 2022, the government approved a skills development framework¹⁹³ for Rohingya refugees and endorsed a volunteer engagement guidance document.¹⁹⁴ These policy developments have enabled the government, UN agencies and other partners to strengthen and formally recognize Rohingya and Bangladeshi volunteer contributions in camp-based humanitarian responses.¹⁹⁵

Through incentive-earning opportunities, volunteers contribute to their communities in water and sanitation efforts, temporary shelter construction, emergency preparedness and response, reforestation and teaching the Myanmar school curriculum. Volunteer programs are also paired with skills development courses tied to humanitarian service delivery, trade training and other activities designed to support livelihoods.

These activities illustrate how volunteering in migration contexts can incorporate livelihood support elements. However, despite these positive advancements, national laws and policies do not grant Rohingya refugees formal access to labour markets or wage-earning employment. The emphasis remains on developing portable skills that prepare Rohingya refugees for voluntary and sustainable return to Myanmar, rather than for local integration.

^{xi} The Government of Bangladesh refers to the Rohingya community in Bangladesh as “Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN).” The UN system refers to this population as Rohingya refugees, in line with the applicable international framework.

While acknowledging the valuable opportunities volunteering presents for migrants' personal development, governments, UN agencies and partners must ensure that volunteering is not used as a substitute for formal employment and social protection systems. Without this recognition, migrants' skills and expertise can be diminished¹⁹⁶ while also increasing their exposure to indecent and informal labour, abuse and exploitation. Where possible, policies and plans addressing migrant volunteering should emphasize that volunteer activities complement, rather than substitute, key pathways for sustainable integration, such as education, skills development and paid employment (see table 3).

TABLE 3: Good practices and practices to avoid when engaging migrants in volunteering

GOOD PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteering complements, and does not replace, paid employment and other pathways for integration. • Recognize volunteering as a valid and valuable pathway to increase migrants' skills and build their careers. • Provide funding, training, equipment, and infrastructure for migrant-involving volunteer organizations and initiatives. Proactively support inclusive migrant volunteering opportunities through grants for organizations that serve migrants. • Value volunteering's integration benefits by embedding it in migrant integration policies such as recognizing it as an asset in residency and citizenship applications. • Guarantee migrants and refugees can participate in volunteer programs without jeopardizing their safety or legal standing. Legal defence is crucial to support volunteering opportunities that are mutually beneficial and fair. • Integrate migrants and refugees in volunteering frameworks, providing standards for duty of care across volunteer-involving organizations and initiatives. Volunteers who are migrants or displaced may need additional support. • Increase accountability and prevent the exploitation and/or exclusion of migrant volunteer
PRACTICES TO AVOID
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewing volunteering solely as a substitution for paid work and limiting support to mere formal recognition. • Overlooking the legal rights of migrants who volunteer. • Discounting the importance of psychosocial support for volunteers working in emergency response. • Neglecting to provide oversight and monitoring of volunteer activities

Source: Table created by the author, integrating findings from RYVU (n.d.), the Network for Dialogue (2022) and Scanlon et al. (2022)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

When harnessed effectively, volunteers can make an immense contribution in fostering safe and inclusive responses to human mobility and channelling migration as a tool for sustainable development. This study aimed to provide concrete evidence of this contribution by examining the ways that volunteers provide assistance in diverse human mobility contexts, by contributing to:



The case studies from Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, and Peru, as well as the numerous other examples presented, illustrate the multifaceted role of volunteering at different stages of the migration journey. Volunteers address pre-migration drivers and factors of vulnerability, meet the immediate humanitarian needs of populations in transit, and provide longer-term support for integration and settlement efforts.

Migration status can both encourage and constrain participation in volunteering activities. Many refugees, IDPs, and migrants volunteer within their own communities, oftentimes informally, out of a shared sense of solidarity and empathy. However, not all countries have a supportive legal and policy environment for non-national migrants to volunteer formally or access the same opportunities as nationals. While recognizing the importance of volunteering for fostering skills development and building resilience in human mobility contexts, it is equally important to consider how volunteering can overlap with livelihoods when developing effective policies that do not increase precarity or vulnerability for those who volunteer.

Volunteers supporting migrants, IDPs and refugees often operate in high-risk environments, making it crucial to construct an enabling policy environment that upholds and strengthens their efforts to provide humanitarian assistance. While many governments recognize the role of volunteers in providing support in these contexts, as reflected in a review of Member States' VNRs, UNSDCFs and CPDs, as well as reporting in relation to the GCR and GCM, there remains a need to intentionally align volunteer frameworks with national development and migration policies. Clear, protective frameworks are also important so volunteers can contribute safely and effectively to migrant support and broader humanitarian goals.

4.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations aim to strengthen volunteer involvement in human mobility contexts. They are organized by stakeholder type, with specific recommendations for governments and broader actions for all relevant stakeholders, including, but not limited to governments, UN entities and volunteer-involving organizations.

Support and protect all volunteers who provide humanitarian assistance to people on the move

Governments should:

- Provide clear legal and policy frameworks that protect volunteers' rights, safety and well-being.
- Not criminalize or penalize the emergency assistance individual volunteers and volunteer-involving organizations provide to migrants. This applies to all stages of migration, including pre-departure, transit, arrival, settlement and return and sustainable integration or reintegration.
- Create inclusive volunteering policies and laws to encourage equitable and diverse participation. Dismantle barriers faced by migrants, women, youth, persons with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups.

All relevant stakeholders should:

- Continue implementing volunteering initiatives that address the multisectoral needs of populations (including health, WASH, education, protection, and shelter) at all stages of the migration journey. Confirm that these responses are both inclusive and gender-integrated, reaching all migrants in situations of vulnerability, regardless of their migration status, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability or other relevant characteristics.
- Contribute human and financial resources for volunteer initiatives assisting populations on the move.
- Support local volunteer initiatives, recognizing their key role in reaching remote and underserved populations.
- Recognize and address the challenging conditions volunteers endure when operating in emergency environments.
- Provide adequate safety protocols, training, insurance coverage, psychosocial support and equipment for volunteers to carry out their work.
- Where relevant, utilize remote and hybrid volunteering modalities, promoting inclusive participation in volunteering and extending geographic reach.

Better integrate volunteering in migration-related policies, plans and legal frameworks

Governments should:

- Align volunteering frameworks with international frameworks on migration like the GCM and GCR and directly reference volunteering in related reporting mechanisms, ensuring that volunteers' contributions are recognized as part of global efforts to support safe, orderly and inclusive migration and displacement responses.
- Provide clear, direct references to volunteering in national development policies, plans and strategies, including VNRs, UNDSCFs and CPDs, institutionalizing and strengthening volunteering in relation to human mobility.
- Include volunteering as a formal mechanism within national action plans to support safer and more effective migration and displacement responses. In addition, provide indicators to track and measure volunteer contributions.

Encourage and facilitate migrants' involvement in volunteering

Governments should:

- Provide supportive legal and policy frameworks that allow migrants and refugees to participate in volunteer programs without jeopardizing their safety or legal standing. Where possible, avoid overly strict regulations that might unintentionally discourage participation.

All relevant stakeholders should:

- Employ accountability mechanisms in volunteer-involving initiatives. Provide opportunities that are mutually beneficial, transparent and support fair treatment of migrant volunteers.
- Assess how volunteering in human mobility contexts interacts with livelihoods. Create sustainable practices that do not exacerbate economic vulnerability or increase the risk of exploitation.
- Disseminate accessible information on volunteering opportunities through multilingual campaigns and community outreach activities, ensuring migrants are aware of their rights and opportunities to contribute.

Increase overall monitoring and data on volunteering in humanitarian efforts

Governments should:

- Create national volunteer databases or registries to better utilize volunteers' potential to rapidly employ migration and displacement-related responses.
- Track participation, with data disaggregated by gender, age, disability, migration status and other relevant characteristics, to support inclusion, as well as identify areas of expertise and resource allocation.

All relevant stakeholders should:

- Require volunteer-involving programs to have regular feedback mechanisms and participatory assessments. These should allow volunteers to provide input on their experiences, enabling organizations to improve volunteer conditions.

Amplify the voice, visibility and recognition of volunteers' contributions to safe and inclusive human mobility

All relevant stakeholders should:

- Invite volunteers, including refugees, IDPs and migrants, to share their lived experiences in national, regional and international forums. They should include consultations and review data related to the GCM and other migration dialogues.
- Recognize volunteering as a pathway to skills development by formally acknowledging contributions through certificates, endorsements, or professional development programs. These should be counted as relevant experience toward job applications, scholarships, or residency permits.

Foster international collaboration to support volunteer-driven migration responses

All relevant stakeholders should:

- Foster cross-border cooperation supporting volunteer efforts in human mobility contexts.
- Encourage knowledge sharing and resource mobilization to harmonize best practices for volunteering in migration and displacement responses.
- Build regional and global platforms, connecting volunteer-involving organizations. Coordinate efforts that ease migration challenges effectively while avoiding resource duplication.



ANNEX 1: GLOSSARY

Anticipatory Action (AA)

The term “anticipatory action,” increasingly used in the context of climate action and disaster risk response, is the process of “acting ahead of predicted hazardous events to prevent or reduce humanitarian impacts before they fully unfold.” A key aspect of AA is that it involves acting prior to the onset or effects of a forecasted hazard, rather than waiting for the event to occur and reacting afterward (Clarke and REAP 2023; UNDRR 2024).

Asylum seeker

“Any person who is seeking international protection. In some countries, it is used as a legal term referring to a person who has applied for refugee status or a complementary international protection status and has not yet received a final decision on their claim. It can also refer to a person who has not yet submitted an application but may intend to do so, or may be in need of international protection” (UNHCR 2006).

Displacement

“The movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters” (IOM 2019a).

Durable solutions

For refugees, this term denotes “any means by which the situation of refugees can be satisfactorily and permanently resolved to enable them to lead normal lives.” For internally displaced persons, a durable solution is found when they “no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement” (IOM 2019a; IASC 2010).

Human mobility

This broad term encompasses all the different forms of movements of persons, both voluntary and forced. These flows can include migration, displacement and planned relocation, and is also considered to include tourism (IOM 2019a; IOM 2018a).

Internally displaced person

“Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border” (African Union 2012).

Migrant

“An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons” (IOM 2019a).

Planned relocation

“A planned process in which persons or groups of persons move or are assisted to move away from their homes or places of temporary residence, are settled in a new location, *and* provided with the conditions for rebuilding their lives. Planned relocation is carried out under the authority of the State, takes place within national borders, and is undertaken to protect people from risks and impacts related to disasters and environmental change, including the effects of climate change. Such planned relocation may be carried out at the individual, household, and/or community levels” (Brookings, Georgetown University and UNHCR 2015).

Refugee

In article 1(A)(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is any person who, “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (UNGA 1951).

Sustainable reintegration

Sustainable integration is a multifaceted, long-term process that spans various sectors and impacts “all aspects of the lives of migrants and of receiving communities.” The IOM defines integration as the “two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and the societies in which they live, whereby migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community” (IOM 2019a). This includes the economic, psychological, linguistic, cultural, civil and political dimensions that enable individuals to put down roots in new communities and achieve self-sufficiency.

Volunteering

UNGA resolution 56/38 (2002) defines volunteering as “a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor” (UNGA 2002).

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