

OECD Local Economic and Employment  
Development (LEED) Papers



# Unleashing the potential of volunteering for local development

An international comparison of trends and tools



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Across OECD countries, just under one-quarter of the population formally volunteers at least once a month. These volunteers contribute to local development in many ways, from revitalising neighbourhoods and enhancing social cohesion to bolstering community resilience to societal pressures and shocks, such as natural disasters. However, volunteering is under pressure in many places. Local and national approaches such as developing overarching strategies and enabling legal frameworks, as well as improving the volunteering “market”, can help to rejuvenate volunteering.

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# Executive summary

## Volunteering has both personal and societal benefits

**Volunteering is a powerful force in addressing pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges at the local level.** Volunteers help to revitalise neighbourhoods, enhance social cohesion and bolster community resilience to societal pressures and shocks, such as natural disasters. Although risks arise when it is seen as a substitute for public services, volunteering can help complement or fill gaps where public services are constrained due to financial pressures. Indeed, volunteering is estimated to have an economic impact equivalent to 1.9% of the GDP across OECD countries. Beyond this, it also has direct positive impacts on the volunteers themselves in terms of physical and mental health, civic mindfulness, and inter-personal trust. For both volunteers and communities, it can also be a tool to address loneliness.

## Almost one-quarter of people volunteer via an organisation

**In 2022/23, just under one-quarter (22%) of the population declared having volunteered formally (i.e. through an organisation) in the past month across the OECD.** Rates are particularly high in Anglophone countries (United States, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia) as well as European countries such as the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Ireland and Norway, where 3 out of 10 people or more volunteered.

**Direct, or informal volunteering, is more common than formal volunteering via an organisation.** Globally, roughly 70% of all volunteer work happens informally between individuals within their respective communities. Across OECD countries with available data in 2015, an average of 36% of people reported that they informally volunteered at least once a year.

**The frequency and nature of volunteering can vary by gender, age as well as other personal characteristics.** For example, globally, men make up a larger share of formal volunteers, whereas women represent a larger share of informal volunteers, and are particularly active in areas like direct caregiving and community support. As informal volunteering is often less recognised and lacks practical and administrative support compared to formal volunteering, it is important to address risks that volunteering reinforces gender norms, or becomes a “burden” on women such as by limiting their availability for paid work. Other demographic factors, such as higher education levels, are also linked to more frequent volunteering.

## Volunteering rates had been declining in recent years, although they have recently rebounded and new forms are emerging

**Despite its importance, volunteering has been under pressure in recent years.** Although disasters and crises generally lead to at least a short-term uptick in volunteering, the unique nature of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced a longer-term downward trend. For example, in the United States, volunteer rates

dropped 7 percentage points from 2019 to 2021, marking its largest decline since data collection began in 2002.

**The most recent data suggests that on average, volunteering has rebounded to its earlier baseline.** Other forms of volunteering are also emerging and growing, such as virtual, episodic and corporate volunteering. However, not all countries and population groups have shared in this recovery. For example, in Japan, OECD data suggests that the volunteer rate in 2022/23 remained 30% lower than the 2008/10 level.

## Strengthening the volunteering infrastructure can help maximise its impacts on local development

**Strengthening the “volunteering infrastructure” at the local and national level can help rejuvenate volunteering and maximise its contributions to local development.** Key components of the volunteering infrastructure include cross-cutting strategies for volunteering, enabling legal frameworks, and a strong market for volunteering (e.g. supply and demand of volunteers, efficiency of matching).

### *Developing overarching volunteering strategies*

**Overarching volunteering strategies help to establish policies, programmes and budgetary frameworks that create a supportive environment for volunteering.** Drawing from stakeholder consultations, these strategies aim to address concerns of volunteer organisations and volunteers, such as ensuring legal protection from liability and building the capacities of organisations to engage and manage volunteers. Additionally, they provide tools to celebrate volunteers, recognise their impact and promote public participation in volunteering.

**However, national strategies remain relatively uncommon across OECD countries.** Notable exceptions include Australia and Ireland, where strategic frameworks have been established. In some cases, countries have national youth strategies which include strategic objectives on youth volunteering, such as in the Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania and Spain. Local and regional authorities can also play a crucial role in developing roadmaps to promote volunteerism within their communities.

### *Establishing enabling legal frameworks*

**Where they exist, legal frameworks recognise volunteers' rights and obligations and protect them from risks and liabilities.** They may include definitions of volunteering, regulations for formal volunteer organisations and protections such as liability coverage. Some countries, particularly in Europe, as well as Colombia and the United States, have established specific laws on volunteering. Some countries address volunteering through broader social economy or labour laws (e.g. distinguishing paid employment from volunteering), while others, such as some Nordic countries, rely on long-standing customs for organisations to self-regulate.

### *Enhancing the market for volunteers*

**Expanding volunteer supply, enhancing demand and improving matching efficiency can strengthen the volunteer market.** Boosting supply can involve raising awareness of the personal and societal benefits of volunteering via marketing campaigns, offering incentives, and addressing barriers like time constraints. On the demand side, organisations can create more appealing roles, clearly communicate impact and adapt to diverse volunteer needs, such as availability or preferences for types of volunteering activities. When well-tailored to specific needs, such approaches can help reduce barriers to volunteering and promote a self-reinforcing cycle of participation and satisfaction for volunteers.

**At the local level, volunteer centres and organisations often use combined measures.** These may span marketing and outreach, developing volunteering opportunities, conducting volunteer management, training, and matching volunteers with volunteer organisations and vice versa. Non-financial incentives can also promote volunteering locally. These range from community currencies to time banks and discount cards.

**In some countries, there are also specific efforts targeted to young people, such as civic service programmes and service-learning opportunities in schools.** This approach aligns with the 2022 OECD Recommendation on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People, which advises countries to promote civic engagement by supporting volunteer service and youth work through appropriate laws, strategies and programmes.

## Areas for further research

**While this paper demonstrates the importance of volunteering, it also identifies gaps in the current research.** Potential areas of further research include:

- Expanding data availability through national and local surveys, including to examine new forms of volunteering, such as digital and episodic volunteering.
- Comprehensively mapping national and subnational legal frameworks and strategies.
- Undertaking further comparative analysis on the different ways social economy organisations engage volunteers and their impacts on the sector.
- Conducting case studies in communities with high volunteering rates to identify best practices and transferrable lessons.
- Unpacking gender and age dynamics, particularly addressing the potential “burden” of informal volunteering on women.

# 1 Introduction

**Volunteering is a powerful force in addressing pressing social, economic and environmental challenges at the local level.** It has important benefits to society, such as revitalising neighbourhoods, enhancing social cohesion and bolstering community resilience to societal pressures and shocks, including demographic change and natural disasters. Although risks arise when it is seen as a substitute for public services, volunteering can help complement or fill gaps where public services are constrained due to financial pressures. Indeed, volunteering has been estimated to have an economic impact equivalent to 1.9% of the GDP of OECD countries (OECD, 2015<sup>[1]</sup>). Beyond the impact it has for communities and societies, it also has direct positive impacts for the volunteers themselves in terms of physical and mental health, civic mindfulness, inter-personal trust, and confidence to participate in public life.

**However, volunteering is also under strain.** Formal volunteer rates had been declining in recent years, with the COVID-19 pandemic bringing additional pressures. While on average across the OECD rates have rebounded to baseline levels, this recovery has not been shared by all places and people. At the same time, megatrends such as demographic change will create additional pressures on public services. Rekindling volunteering can be one part of the response – helping to complement public services while also providing a means to keep individuals engaged and connected to their communities.

**This paper provides an overview of volunteering across OECD countries, as well as examples of the types of policies and programmes that national and local actors have put in place to support volunteering.** It begins by defining volunteering, before providing a snapshot of trends within and across OECD countries in terms of volunteering rates, impacts and motivations. The following section provides an overview of the types of policies, legal frameworks, strategies and measures that have been put in place to support volunteer activities, i.e. the “volunteer infrastructure.” In addition to the broader literature, it builds on interviews in selected communities as well as previous OECD work, including work related to the social and solidarity economy, and work on well-being, such as the “How’s Life” publication series.

## Defining volunteering

**While volunteering can be defined in a number of ways,<sup>1</sup> this paper uses the International Labor Organization (ILO) definition.** The ILO defines “volunteer work” in its 2011 Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work as follows:

*“Unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organization or directly for others outside their own household” (ILO, 2011<sup>[2]</sup>).*

Although small stipends that are below the value of local market wages may be provided, volunteer work by definition refers to work without compensation in any form. Since the work must also be non-compulsory to be classified as volunteering, the ILO Manual recommends a minimum age of 15 years to ensure individuals have the legal capacity to participate in or refuse to volunteer.

**Volunteer work includes both informal (direct) and formal volunteering.** Informal volunteering refers to volunteering directly for other households (excluding the volunteer’s own household), while formal or organisation-based volunteering refers to volunteering done for or via non-profit institutions, government

entities, corporations or other types of organisations, including in the social economy.<sup>2</sup> It encompasses a wide range of activities and sectors, including welfare, education, environment, politics and religion, as illustrated in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1. Examples of activities considered in-scope and out-of-scope of volunteering**

| <b>In scope</b>                                                                                         | <b>Out-of-scope</b>                              |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Buying groceries for an elderly neighbour                                                               | Buying groceries for one's own family            |
| Working in a soup kitchen cooking meals for the homeless                                                | Cooking meals for one's family                   |
| Volunteering as a teacher in a public school                                                            | Helping your child with her homework             |
| Serving on a grievance committee for a labour union                                                     | Conducting business for profit                   |
| Serving on a neighbourhood clean-up committee                                                           | Cleaning one's own house or yard                 |
| Working at a voter registration drive                                                                   | Voting                                           |
| Distributing food, medical, or material assistance at a shelter                                         | Driving your wife to a hospital for medical care |
| Serving as a deacon or usher at your church                                                             | Attending a religious service                    |
| Helping a non-profit environmental organization gather water samples without compensation               | Doing research for one's occupation              |
| Providing legal advice at a legal services agency                                                       | Being paid for legal advice or assistance        |
| Serving as a coach for a children's football league, including one in which one's own child is involved | Helping your own child to practice football      |
| Making clothes for disadvantaged children                                                               | Fixing clothes for one's own children            |
| Constructing housing for homeless families                                                              | Fixing one's own home                            |

Source: ILO (2011<sup>[2]</sup>), *Manual on the measurement of volunteer work*

## 2 Volunteering rates and trends

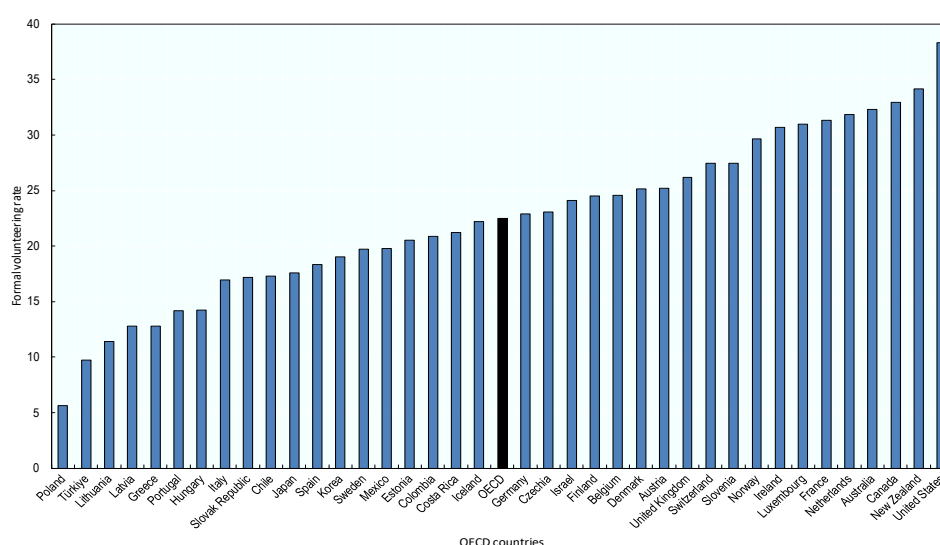
### How many people volunteer?

**Volunteering is not a niche issue.** Across the world, over 860 million people volunteer at least once a month, roughly 15% of the global population aged 15 years or older. This is equivalent to 61 million full-time workers each month, based on a 40-hour work week (United Nations Volunteers, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Moreover, although national data on volunteers are only available in 15 member states within the European Union (EU), it shows that there are over 53 million active volunteers in the region alone (European Commission, 2024<sup>[4]</sup>).

**In 2022/23, just under one-quarter (22%) of the population declared having volunteered formally (i.e. through an organisation) in the past month across the OECD (see Figure 2.1).** Rates are particularly high in Anglophone countries (United States, New Zealand, Canada and Australia) as well as European countries such as the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Ireland and Norway, where 3 out of 10 people or more volunteer at least once a month. While the focus of this paper is on formal volunteering, an even higher share of the population volunteers informally (see Box 2.2). However, as described in Box 2.1, collecting data on volunteering is difficult, so figures from other sources may vary depending on methodologies, frequency considered, etc.

### Figure 2.1. Formal volunteering rates

Percentage of the population aged 15+ who declared having volunteered through an organisation in the past month, 2022/23



Note: The OECD average is the simple, unweighted average of countries with available data.

Source: OECD (n.d.<sup>[5]</sup>), *How's Life? Well-being Database*, <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu>

### Box 2.1. The challenges of collecting data on volunteering

**Although an international definition and methodology to collect data on volunteering has been developed by the ILO, it is not used uniformly across countries.** Not all countries conduct surveys using the same methodology, and there may be different areas of focus (e.g. formal volunteering, informal volunteering, frequency, age, gender, among others) depending on the country. Additionally, some countries do not conduct surveys every year, making international comparisons of volunteer data highly challenging.

**In fact, the 2022 United Nations Volunteers (UNV) State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR) also points out that measuring volunteering on an international scale remains difficult.** However, since the new UNV-ILO tools and guidance was launched in 2018, at least 25 countries have undertaken new national statistical measurements of volunteering, helping to highlight the scale and scope of volunteer engagement around the world. Yet challenges persist, as many countries postponed measuring volunteering in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**For the purposes of this paper, the main data source used is the Gallup World Poll, as reported in the OECD How's Life? Well-being Database, as it provides the most up to date and complete coverage for OECD countries** (OECD, n.d.<sup>[5]</sup>). For certain topics, such as informal volunteering, other sources of data are used as complements.

**For further information on different approaches to collecting data on volunteering, see OECD (2015<sup>[6]</sup>).**

Source: (United Nations Volunteers, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>)

**A variety of historical, cultural and institutional factors can help to explain differences across countries** (Enjolras, 2021<sup>[7]</sup>). For example, in countries with a history of mandatory activities through organisations, some people may continue to feed negative connotations about volunteering and there may be higher levels of mistrust for public or communal activities (Gen, 2023<sup>[8]</sup>; Kuti, 2004<sup>[9]</sup>). On the other hand, a positive correlation has been found between welfare state programmes and volunteer rates (Ackermann, Erhardt and Freitag, 2023<sup>[10]</sup>). For example, in countries with more generous pension systems, there may be higher rates of volunteering among the retired and the elderly. Civil society traditions also matter. Countries with more liberal traditions (i.e. smaller governments, lower public spending and larger non-profit sectors), such as the United Kingdom, and corporatist traditions (i.e. “close working relationship between state and non-profits, extensive government social welfare spending and a sizeable [subsidised] non-profit sector”), including Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands, are more likely to have a strong presence of associations that work with volunteers (Gen, 2023<sup>[8]</sup>; Meijs, Hendriks and Dobрева, 2021<sup>[11]</sup>). Some social economy entities, such as associations, indeed rely heavily on volunteers to sustain their operations (OECD, 2023<sup>[12]</sup>).

**Countries may also have different models of voluntary work.** In Nordic countries, voluntary work is often considered a leisure time activity, rather than an altruistic form of helping those in need (Stende, Andreasson and Frøshaug, 2020<sup>[13]</sup>). In fact, voluntary work in these countries is predominantly performed in areas such as sport, culture, hobbies and other recreational activities, compared to areas such as welfare and society common in other countries.

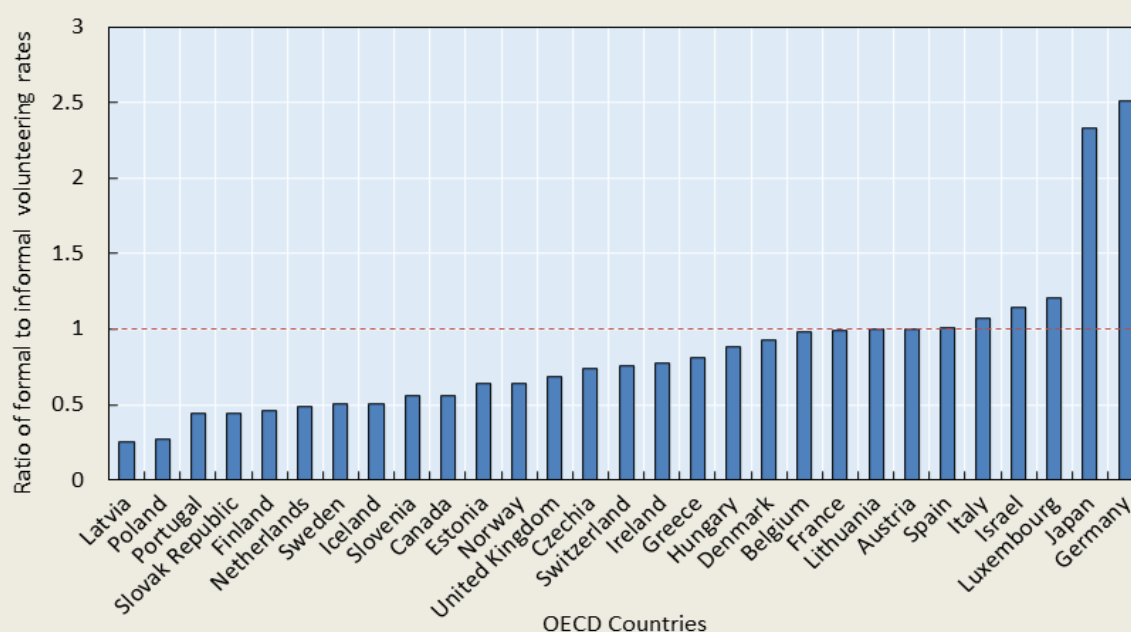
### Box 2.2. Informal vs. formal volunteering

Globally, informal volunteering (i.e. volunteering directly between individuals within their respective communities) is more common than formal volunteering via an organisation, with an estimated 70% of all volunteer work happening informally (Salamon, Sokolowski and Haddock, 2018<sup>[14]</sup>). In most OECD countries, informal volunteering is likewise more common than formal volunteering (see Figure 2.2). However, in a few countries, the formal volunteer rate is significantly higher than its informal counterpart, notably in Germany and Japan.

**More research can be done to better understand the relationship between formal and informal volunteering.** For example, these ratios do not take into account the intensity or frequency of volunteering, so should be interpreted with caution. Additionally, more research is needed to understand why some country patterns differ, as well as how at an individual level, time spent in one type of volunteering activity impacts the other (Qvist, 2024<sup>[15]</sup>).

**Figure 2.2. Ratio of formal to informal volunteering rates, selected OECD countries**

Population who volunteered at least once a year, 2015 or latest available

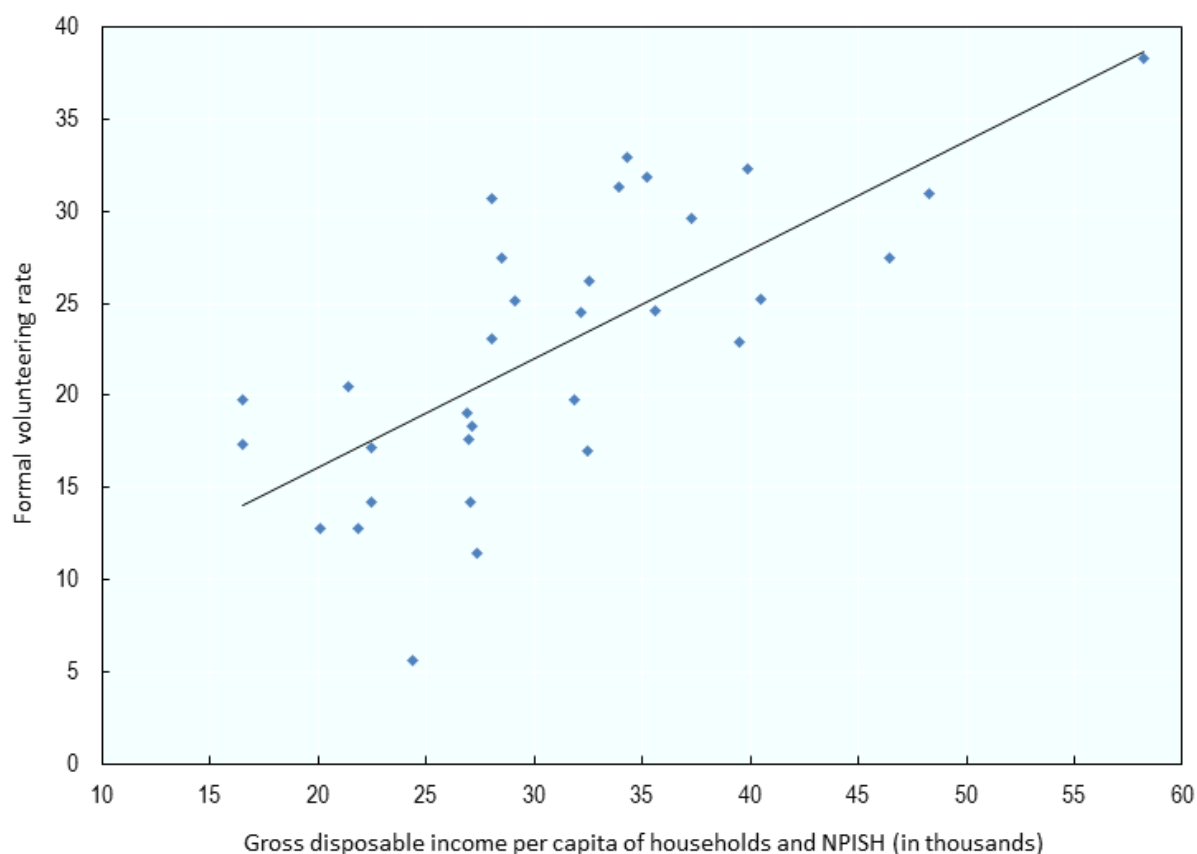


Note: In order to make comparisons between formal and informal volunteering, this graph uses different data sources than the rest of the paper, so it is not directly comparable to the other graphs. The majority of country data is from 2015, with the exception of four countries that use different years as 2015 data was not available: Canada (2018), United Kingdom (2019), Israel (2019), and Japan (2016). Age range considered varies by country. Values above 1 indicate more formal volunteering, while values below 1 indicate more informal volunteering. Source: OECD elaboration based on (ILO, n.d.<sup>[16]</sup>), *Statistics on volunteer work*, <https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/volunteer-work/>

**Across OECD countries, there is a positive correlation between household income and formal volunteering rates (Figure 2.3).** This may reflect the fact that people need to have the means to be able to volunteer, including higher levels of resources such as a higher disposable income (Meijs, Hendriks and Dobрева, 2021<sup>[11]</sup>; Gen, 2023<sup>[8]</sup>). However, this positive correlation between household income per capita and volunteering rates may be affected as social and economic challenges like the cost-of-living crisis

emerge, (El-Ali, 2022<sup>[17]</sup>; NCVO, 2023<sup>[18]</sup>). Time available to volunteer may also mediate the relationship between income and volunteering.

**Figure 2.3. Correlation between formal volunteering rates and household income across OECD countries**



Note: Gross disposable income data is from 2022, expressed in US dollars per person, PPP converted, current prices. Some values are estimated; see source for further details. Formal volunteering rates are for 2022/23. Data not available for Colombia, Costa Rica, Iceland, Israel, New Zealand, and Türkiye

Source: OECD (n.d.<sup>[5]</sup>), *How's Life? Well-being Database*, <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu> and OECD (2023<sup>[19]</sup>) *OECD National Accounts Statistics (database)*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c1524558-en>

**Moreover, levels of inequality may be an important mediator between GDP and volunteering rates.**

One study has found that while GDP per capita is positively associated with volunteering, the distribution of economic resources appears to be more significant in understanding the differences in volunteer rates between countries (Enjolras, 2021<sup>[7]</sup>). The results found that the Gini index (a measure of inequality) is negatively associated with volunteering, with signs that heightened inequality largely reduced the likelihood of volunteering and individuals' capabilities to volunteer. Some researchers have also made a positive link between lower levels of inequality and volunteering – Nordic and Continental European institutional regimes tend to have lower levels of inequality, which may contribute to increased social trust and higher rates of formal volunteering (Enjolras, 2021<sup>[7]</sup>).

## What are the impacts of volunteering?

**Volunteering has impacts on multiple levels.** This includes personal impacts on the individual doing the volunteering, such as improved mental and physical well-being, to community and societal impacts including community cohesion and mutual cooperation, to economic impacts (OECD, 2015<sup>[6]</sup>; Bonfils and King, 2018<sup>[20]</sup>). Within OECD countries, the value of the time people spend volunteering has been estimated at 1.9% of the GDP on average (OECD, 2015<sup>[6]</sup>).

### *Impacts on individuals*

**While volunteering is often thought of as a service to others, its benefits to those *doing* the volunteer work may be as great – or even greater – than those on the receiving side** (OECD, 2015<sup>[6]</sup>). For example, it can help improve physical and psychological well-being (Thoits and Hewitt, 2001<sup>[21]</sup>). People who volunteer are more likely to report high subjective well-being than those who do not, as individuals can gain improved health, self-confidence, engagement, networks and skill development through volunteering (Meier and Stutzer, 2004<sup>[22]</sup>; Meijs, Hoorn and Brudney, 2006<sup>[23]</sup>). It also enhances civic mindfulness, inter-personal trust and confidence to participate in public life, which in turn can increase trust in public institutions (OECD, 2024<sup>[24]</sup>).

**Beyond internal rewards, such as helping individuals feel better about themselves via a positive self-image or the heartfelt satisfaction of contributing to society, volunteering can also offer tangible or material rewards, as well as social rewards.** The former may include credit for academic courses, tuition stipends, work experience, professional contacts, prestige and an enhanced resume. Social rewards include interacting with new people with similar interests and a sense of community belonging (Cnaan and Amroffell, 1994<sup>[25]</sup>; Lie, Baines and Wheelock, 2009<sup>[26]</sup>; United Nations Volunteers, 2012<sup>[27]</sup>; United Nations Volunteers, 2011<sup>[28]</sup>).

### *Impacts on communities and societies*

**Volunteering helps build social capital, strengthen community networks, foster civic engagement and contribute to economic development** (Wollebaek and Selle, 2002<sup>[29]</sup>). Indeed, in the OECD Well-Being Framework, volunteering is used as an indicator to measure social capital (OECD, 2024<sup>[30]</sup>). Volunteering is crucial from a community participation perspective, as it plays a significant role in citizenship engagement and local governance through boosting social cohesion and inclusion (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017<sup>[31]</sup>). For example, the Dutch community care approach for the elderly, people with disabilities and those with severe mental disorders prioritises civic participation and activation through its reliance on volunteering. This approach provides a mix of formal care, informal care by family and neighbours, and general public services offered by community centres and volunteers (Meijs, 2018<sup>[32]</sup>; Eurocarers, 2023<sup>[33]</sup>). Neighbourhood associations can also play an important role in local civic life, as demonstrated in Japan (see Box 2.3). In Ireland, where over 1 million people volunteer every year, the estimated economic contribution of volunteers is over EUR 5 billion per annum (Cavan Volunteer Centre, 2023<sup>[34]</sup>).

### Box 2.3. Neighbourhood Associations in Japan

**Across Japan, there are approximately 300 000 neighbourhood associations (*jichikai*).** These associations are resident-run organisations that aim to improve the lives of residents and strengthen community ties within their respective neighbourhoods through volunteering. This includes activities such as conducting cleanup tasks, supporting traffic safety and hosting local festivals to foster a sense of community. In principle, all households within the community are considered to be members of the *jichikai*, and the association represents the community to local governments and other third parties. A study on the relationship between neighbourhood association participation and formal volunteering in Japan found that there is a positive correlation between the two, with the *jichikai* serving as a source of inspiration to further engage in volunteering activities outside of their communities.

Source: (Matsuoka, 2024<sup>[35]</sup>; Taniguchi and Marshall, 2016<sup>[36]</sup>; Asahi Shimbun, 2023<sup>[37]</sup>)

**Volunteering benefits society as a whole, including local and national governments, as it helps to reduce public costs, keeps services affordable and saves taxpayer money** (Bovaird et al., 2014<sup>[38]</sup>). Given the changes in socio-economic circumstances and growing challenges such as ageing population and climate change, it is becoming difficult for the public sector alone to implement solutions. As such, volunteering activities can often complement, or supplement, public policy and support provided by national and local governments. For example, volunteers can play an important role in cities hosting global events to complement the large-scale mobilisation of public resources and capacities needed (Box 2.4). However, while volunteering can be an important *complement* to public services, risks arise when it is seen as a substitute.

**Volunteers have historically contributed to welfare initiatives in a number of countries.** During the mid-19th century, the Neighbourhood Movement in the United Kingdom began assisting families in need through volunteering. Since then, volunteering has significantly expanded, exemplified by the 100 000 volunteers who contribute to the National Health Service (NHS) organisations, as well as the 400 000 individuals who participated in the NHS Volunteer Responders programme during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of whom have continued volunteering (NHS, n.d.<sup>[39]</sup>).

**Germany's Elberfeld System also started in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, whereby volunteers provided help for poor families.** This was imported to Japan in the early 20th century, and even today, volunteers (or "welfare commissioners") are appointed every 3 years by Japan's Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare to visit those who need to be cared for daily, such as families in need. According to the latest data from 2021, the number of commissioners exceeds 230 000 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2024<sup>[40]</sup>). In recent years, these visits have also helped in addressing isolation and detecting early-stage dementia in Japan.

**Likewise, volunteers are active in supporting environmental initiatives.** In Germany, *Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland* (BUND; "German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation") and the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU) are national-level volunteer organisations with branches at the municipal and district level. They are engaged in a wide range of activities, from securing biodiversity and preserving the natural environment to tackling global warming. In the United Kingdom, the National Trust and Groundworks also work with many volunteers to conserve the natural environment and provide outdoor activities for children.

**Volunteers are also regarded as important human resources that can help save, as well generate, financial resources for parts of the social economy, such as non-profits and associations,** (Haski-Leventhal, Hustinx and Handy, 2011<sup>[41]</sup>). Volunteers have a unique financial value which is particularly significant for not-for-profit organisations that face budgetary constraints due to economic recessions or

government cutbacks, or other factors contributing to volatility in funding (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx, 2009<sup>[42]</sup>). Moreover, volunteers can enhance an organisation's reputation or legitimacy, which may, in turn, attract more financial resources in the long-run, further increasing the economic impact of volunteers (Haski-Leventhal, Hustinx and Handy, 2011<sup>[41]</sup>).

### Box 2.4. Volunteers at the Olympic and Paralympic Games

**The Olympic and Paralympic games engage a large number of volunteers.** The call for volunteers for the 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games garnered over 300 000 applications, of which 45 000 were chosen as volunteers, illustrating the high level of interest in volunteering during the Games. These valuable volunteering experiences create skilled, valuable and empowered individuals who often go on to continue volunteering in general, beyond this specific event. In fact, a study on the 2012 London Games found that 66.2% of the respondents were encouraged to consider future volunteering after having volunteered for the event, demonstrating the Games' lasting impact on the volunteers.

Source: (Petit, 2024<sup>[43]</sup>; Koutrou, 2016<sup>[44]</sup>)

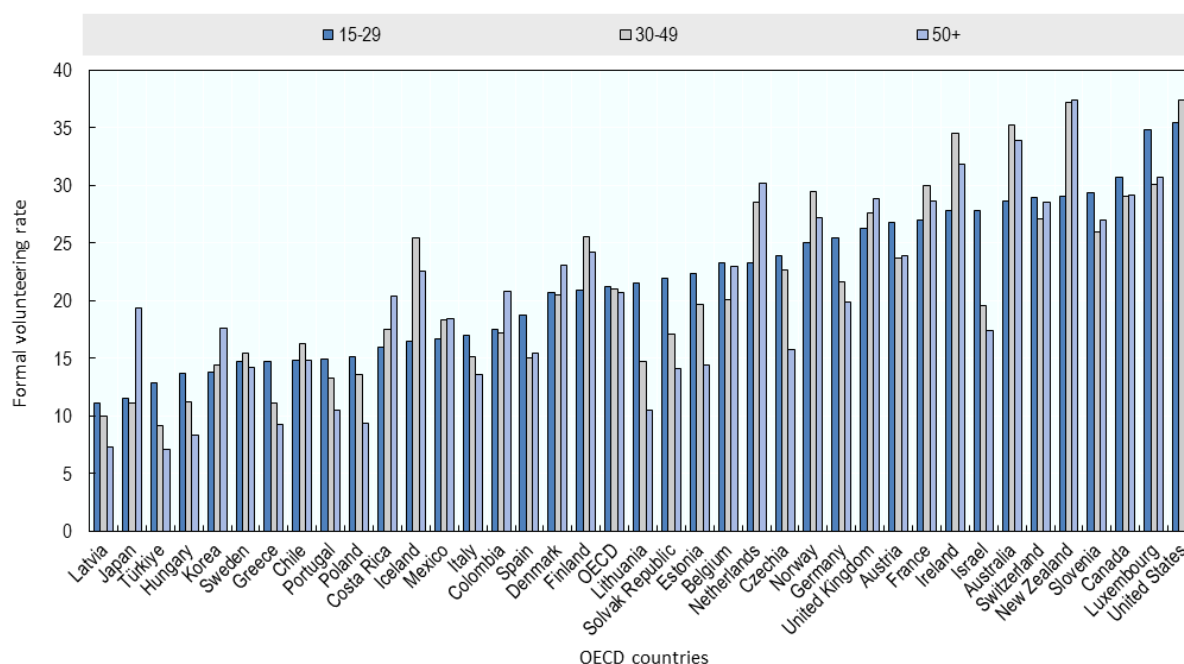
## Who is most active in volunteering?

### Age

**When considering all OECD countries combined, volunteering rates are generally similar across age groups** (OECD, 2024<sup>[30]</sup>). However, it is important to note that these trends may vary with the frequency of volunteering. For example, OECD PIACC data suggests that the rate of volunteering at least once a week (i.e. very regularly) is highest for those aged 55-65 and for early retirees (OECD, 2015<sup>[6]</sup>). However, these data should be interpreted with caution as differences are quite small and, as shown in Figure 2.1, there can be important country differences.

**Figure 2.4. Formal volunteering rate by age**

Percentage of the population who declared having volunteered through an organisation in the past month, 2017-23



Note: The OECD average is the simple, unweighted average of countries with available data. Due to small sample sizes, data are pooled multi-year averages. Data should be interpreted with caution due to relatively small sample sizes in some countries. See source for further details. Source: OECD (n.d.<sup>[5]</sup>), *How's Life? Well-being Database*, <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu>

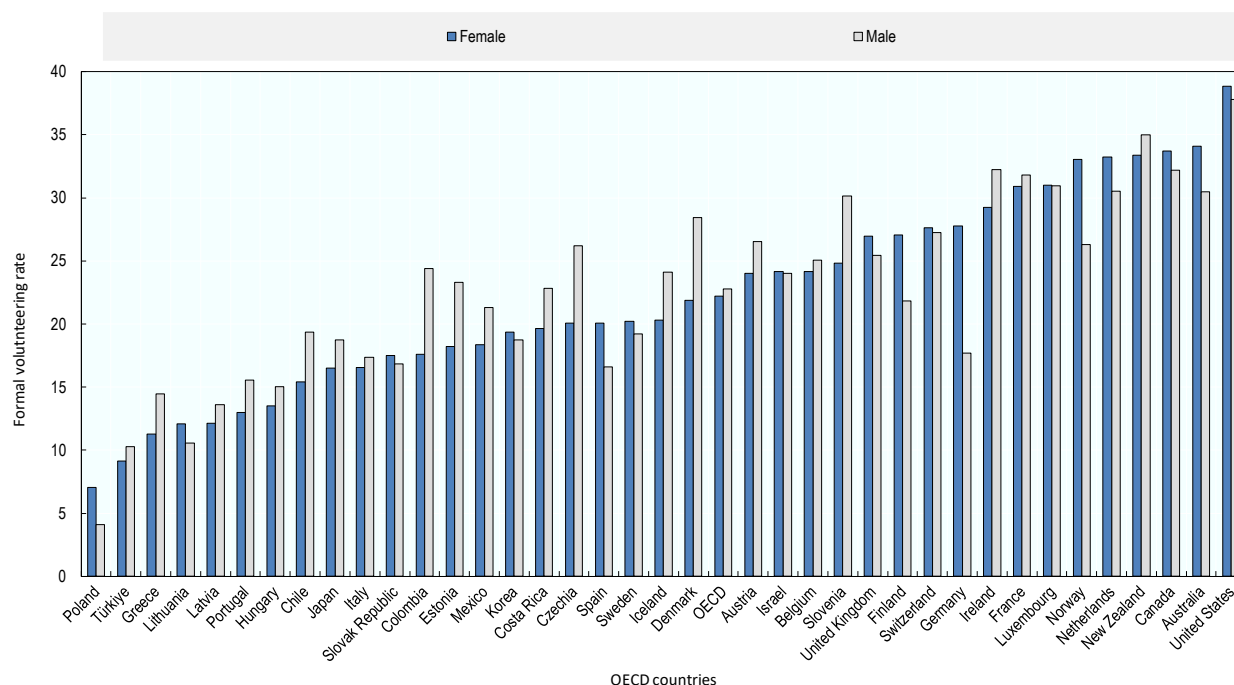
**Additionally, some countries have particularly high rates of volunteering for certain age groups, such as for the elderly in Japan.** Rates of volunteering amongst those aged 50+ are almost twice as high as for other age groups. One contributing factor may be its ageing population and the need to respond to social inclusion challenges among the elderly by strengthening local communities through civic engagement (German Institute for Japanese Studies, 2022<sup>[45]</sup>). For example, Japan has over 85 000 senior citizen clubs that host almost 4.4 million members, with its objectives including improved physical and mental health and contributing to the local community through activities such as volunteering (Nemoto et al., 2018<sup>[46]</sup>; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2023<sup>[47]</sup>). Additionally, there are more than 180 000 welfare volunteer groups in Japan that involve 6 million volunteers, the majority of whom are elderly.

## Gender

**On average across OECD countries, 23% of men and 22% of women volunteer at least once a month (see Figure 2.5).** While this suggests no clear *quantitative* differences in volunteering rates across genders, there may be important *qualitative* differences, such as sectors of activities. Men tend to be more involved in organisations within sports or rescue services, whereas women are significantly more engaged in health, social service and education-related volunteering (Mathou, 2010<sup>[48]</sup>). This may explain, for example, why men show higher rates in Austria, as the largest proportion of its volunteers are active in sports clubs and associations, followed by disaster and emergency services (Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Health and Consumer Protection, 2019<sup>[49]</sup>). On the other hand, Lithuania has higher formal volunteer participation rates among women, a trend that is reflected in the country's most popular areas of volunteering, which are social and health care, children and youth activities, and culture and education (European Commission, n.d.<sup>[50]</sup>).

**Figure 2.5. Formal volunteering rate by gender**

Percentage of the population aged 15+ who declared having volunteered through an organisation in the past month, 2022/23



Note: The OECD average is the simple, unweighted average of countries with available data. Due to small sample sizes, data are pooled multi-year averages. Data should be interpreted with caution due to relatively small sample sizes in some countries. See source for further details.

Source: OECD (n.d.<sup>[5]</sup>), *How's Life? Well-being Database*, <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu>

**Global data shows that while on average, men make up a larger share of formal volunteers, women make up a larger share of informal volunteers** (United Nations Volunteers, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>). Informal volunteering is often less recognised and lacks practical and administrative support compared to formal volunteering (United Nations Volunteer, 2024<sup>[51]</sup>). Accordingly, it is important to address risks that volunteering reinforces gender norms, or becomes a “burden” on women such as by limiting their availability for paid work. In Germany, for example, research suggests that the informal volunteer participation rate among women is highest, potentially because women have more time to offer assistance to neighbouring households and communities, considering that they are less likely to engage in full-time work (Helms and McKenzie, 2013<sup>[52]</sup>).

### **Other predictors of volunteer rates**

**A number of other demographic and social factors are also linked with likelihood to volunteer, such as educational attainment** (OECD, 2015<sup>[6]</sup>). A 2021 study by the European Economic and Social Committee found that individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to volunteer. The report argues that people who want and are able to volunteer tend to have higher level of resources, which includes higher education, as well as other factors such as a higher disposable income (Meijs, Hendriks and Dobrova, 2021<sup>[11]</sup>). In fact, 20% of people with at most secondary school education volunteered at least monthly in 2019–2023, compared to 25% for the tertiary educated (OECD, 2024<sup>[30]</sup>).

**Moreover, family settings influence volunteer rates** (OECD, 2015<sup>[6]</sup>). Married or common-law couples are reportedly more likely to engage in formal volunteering than single individuals, while having young

children in the household further increases this participation rate. For example, in Nordic countries, much of the countries' volunteering is "parent voluntary work", which refers to parents who volunteer in their children's school, such as supporting after-school activities (Stende, Andreasson and Frøshaug, 2020<sup>[13]</sup>). These factors suggest that those with higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to volunteer, as they not only have relevant skills, but also the means to be able to engage in unpaid work.

## What motivates people to volunteer?

**A number of frameworks have been proposed to explain what motivates people to volunteer.** One separates motivation into "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" factors. The former refers to those who volunteer because they genuinely enjoy helping others, and thus no other reward is necessary to encourage them. The latter refers to individuals who volunteer instrumentally, expecting some form of external benefit or payoff (Meier and Stutzer, 2004<sup>[22]</sup>).

**For example, for members of Generation Z (born between 1997 to 2012), learning opportunities and career benefits are reportedly the strongest motivating factors to volunteer** (Cho, Bonn and Han, 2018<sup>[53]</sup>). As such, lack of information, including unawareness of opportunities, unclear responsibilities and insufficient understanding of the benefits of volunteering, is often cited as one of the reasons why young people are unwilling to volunteer, highlighting the importance of accurately clarifying the content of and reasons for engaging in volunteer activities (Garai-Fodor, Varga and Csiszárík-Kocsir, 2021<sup>[54]</sup>).

**Another framework to understand the goals individuals would like to achieve through volunteering considers the time horizon and social norms.** The "hedonic frame" involves short-term goals such as momentarily feeling better about oneself; the "gain frame" refers to longer-term objectives, such as those who volunteer to enhance their resources, whether material or immaterial; and the "normative frame" may be for those who volunteer to act appropriately in accordance with a certain group in which they belong (Lindenberg, 2006<sup>[55]</sup>).

**The functional approach to volunteering suggests that people volunteer to satisfy social and psychological needs** (Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth, 1996<sup>[56]</sup>). The needs that individuals attempt to satisfy through volunteering may be categorised into six themes, as outlined in Table 2.1. Following a survey that asked volunteers and non-volunteers to indicate how important each theme is, or would be, in their decision to volunteer, it was found that this varies depending on past experience in volunteering, gender and career (Clary, Snyder and Stukas, 1996<sup>[57]</sup>). For example, although "value" was the strongest motivating factor for both volunteers and non-volunteers, women tended to perceive all six factors as more important than men. Moreover, "career" was the only motivating factor that was stronger among non-volunteers than the volunteers.

**Table 2.1. Reasons for volunteering**

| Motivation    | Items                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Value         | 1) I feel it is important to help others;<br>2) I can do something for a cause that is important to me; and<br>3) I feel compassion towards people in need.                                                                                                                                  |
| Understanding | 1) I can explore my own strengths;<br>2) I can learn new skills through direct hands-on experience; and<br>3) Volunteering allows me to gain a new perspective on things.                                                                                                                    |
| Enhancement   | 1) Volunteering makes me feel needed.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Career        | 1) Volunteering can help me get my foot in the door at a place where I would like to work;<br>2) I can make new contacts that might help my business or career;<br>3) Volunteer experience will look good on my resume; and<br>4) Volunteering helps me to explore different career options. |

|            |                                                                   |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social     | 1) Volunteering is an important activity to the people I respect. |
| Protective | 1) Volunteering helps me deal with some of my own problems.       |

Source: OECD elaboration based on Clary, Snyder and Stukas (1996<sup>[57]</sup>), “Volunteers’ Motivations: Findings from a National Survey”

**The concept of “volunteerability” is also fundamental to understanding what makes an individual more or less willing or capable to volunteer** (Meijs, Hoorn and Brudney, 2006<sup>[23]</sup>). Volunteerability refers to the ability to overcome certain barriers and volunteer. It can be measured according to three components: willingness, capability and availability. A survey of non-volunteers identified the following barriers, which if removed would make them more likely to start volunteering in the next 12 months (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2017<sup>[31]</sup>):

- The strongest willingness barriers were, “if I could do specific roles that appeal to me”, “if I could see the good I was doing” and “if it was a well-known organization/cause”. This suggests that extrinsic utilities such as feeling better about oneself and receiving recognition can increase an individual’s willingness to volunteer.
- The top answers for capability, which depends on whether people have the skills, competencies and knowledge required for volunteering, were, “if I felt safe and secure”, “if training was provided” and “if I knew more about volunteering opportunities near me”. These findings highlight the importance of training, support and “on-the-job” learning while volunteering, as well as clear communications on volunteering opportunities.
- The most influential availability barrier was, “if it was close to where I live”, followed by, “I could stop any time I want without consequences”, and “I could do it from home” and “It fit my schedule” at joint third. This suggests that national frameworks that promote and allow for full-time volunteering, including gap year activities in the government programmes in the United Kingdom and the United States, such as AmeriCorps, may be effective in overcoming these availability obstacles (Meijs, Hoorn and Brudney, 2006<sup>[23]</sup>).

**Additionally, experts on volunteering have cited the importance of ensuring a “self-reinforcing cycle” for volunteering.** Volunteering begins with participation. At this stage, it is imperative to facilitate the participation process for first-time volunteers by providing them with accurate information on the content and significance of volunteering. It is then important that these first-time volunteers experience a sense of accomplishment, interaction and connection with others, and a level of satisfaction that differs from that of their ordinary lives, to ensure that they continue volunteering. In fact, studies have found that volunteer retention rates are higher when volunteers have a clearer idea of their responsibilities and activities, feel a sense of accomplishment, and receive acknowledgement for the difference they make (Kanemura, 2023<sup>[58]</sup>; Fehl, 2023<sup>[59]</sup>).

## How have trends in volunteering changed over time?

**On average, formal volunteering rates were on the decline in the years leading up to COVID-19, which further reinforced this downward trend** (Figure 2.6). Although disasters and crises generally lead to at least a short-term uptick in volunteering (see Box 2.5), the unique nature of the COVID-19 pandemic had the opposite effect. For example, in the US, volunteer rates dropped 7 percentage points from 2019 to 2021, marking its largest decline since both AmeriCorps and the United States Census began their data collection in 2002 (AmeriCorps, 2022<sup>[60]</sup>). Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, rates fell 10 percentage points from pre-pandemic levels, with only 27% of people engaging in formal volunteering at least once in 2021/22, which marks the lowest rate recorded (UK Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023<sup>[61]</sup>).

**There is widespread research showing that individuals were afraid of becoming infected with COVID-19 while volunteering during the pandemic, negatively affecting intentions to volunteer,**

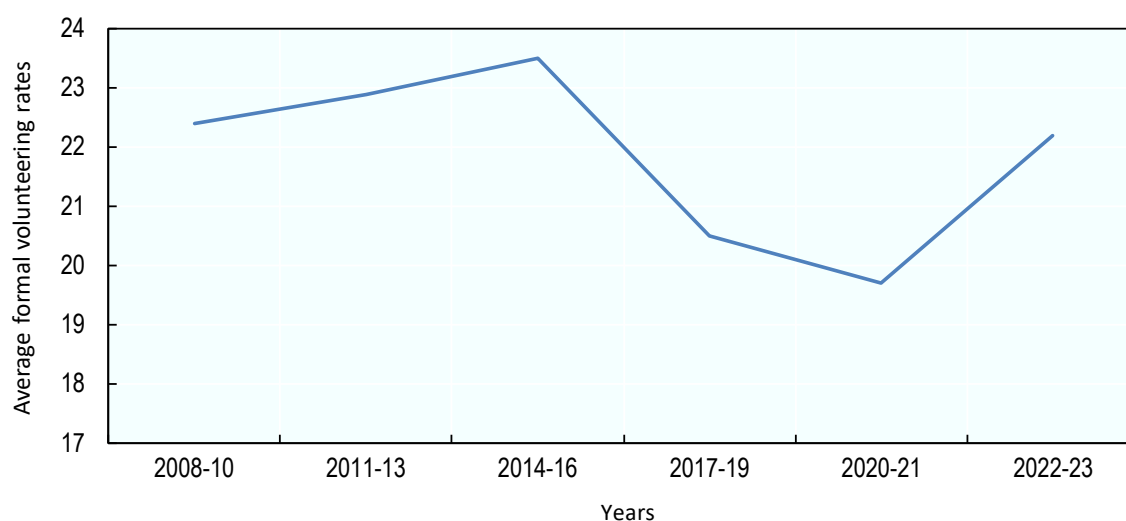
**particularly if it involved social contact** (Lazarus et al., 2021<sup>[62]</sup>; Ding, Ji and Guo, 2021<sup>[63]</sup>; Cervera-Gasch, González-Chordá and Mena-Tudela, 2020<sup>[64]</sup>). In fact, further evidence has found that there is indeed a negative correlation between COVID-19 risk perception and pro-sociality, such as performing volunteer work (Dryhurst et al., 2020<sup>[65]</sup>).

**Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic did inspire many to consider volunteering.** An ILO report that examined the Google search index from the past five years revealed that interests in volunteering reached unprecedented levels at the beginning of the outbreak (Ganta, 2020<sup>[66]</sup>). In fact, informal volunteering between individuals in their communities remained strong throughout the pandemic across OECD countries, with almost half (44%) of people reporting that they had helped a stranger in the previous month during 2020, similar to rates in 2019 (OECD, 2021<sup>[67]</sup>). Young volunteers especially played a significant role in ensuring the continuity of services for vulnerable groups during the early stages of COVID-19, with some governments even establishing dedicated programmes for youth volunteering amid the pandemic (OECD, 2020<sup>[68]</sup>).

**The most recent data from 2022/23 suggest that volunteering rates have subsequently rebounded to baseline levels, although not all countries and population groups have shared in this recovery.** For example, in Japan, OECD data suggest that the volunteer rate in 2022/23 remained 30% lower than the 2008/10 level. Other countries that show a 10% or more decline over this period include Australia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Korea, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and Slovenia. In France, 2024 volunteering rates exceeded 2010 levels for 15-34 year-olds and 35-49 year-olds, but remain depressed for older generations, particularly those aged 65 and older for whom the downward trend has continued even beyond the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Recherches & Solidarités, 2024<sup>[69]</sup>).

**Figure 2.6. Trends in formal volunteering, OECD average**

Share of population who volunteered at least once a month through an organisation, 2008/10-2022/23



Note: The OECD average is the simple, unweighted average for countries with available data in a given period. Data are pooled multi-year averages.

Source: OECD (n.d.<sup>[5]</sup>), *How's Life? Well-being Database*, <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/fu>

### Box 2.5. Disasters and crises often lead to a spike in volunteering

**Volunteering rates tend to significantly increase during and after natural disasters or crises.**

This form of volunteering is often referred to as “spontaneous volunteering”, defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) as an individual “who is not affiliated with existing incident response organizations but who is motivated to contribute unpaid work during and following incidents” (International Organization for Standardization, 2017<sup>[70]</sup>).

**In Japan, for example, volunteer rates surge after natural disasters that require urgent assistance, particularly following earthquakes and tsunamis.** Volunteering grew in prominence 20 years ago after the 1995 Kobe earthquake. A study conducted by Keio University and Gunma University found that besides low opportunity costs for workers, “factors such as altruistic and philanthropic sentiment” became popular motivating factors to engage in volunteerism (Shigeo, 2000<sup>[71]</sup>; Isamu and Kazuyasu, 2012<sup>[72]</sup>). It has been reported that more than 1.8 million people volunteered in response to the 1995 Kobe earthquake and more than 5 million following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Both formal and informal volunteers played important roles in rescuing victims from debris, clearing out rubble and distributing food.

**Volunteer rates also rise after disasters in the US.** For example, volunteers responded in great numbers to the September 11th attacks. Around 30 000 to 40 000 volunteers travelled to New York for relief operations, while another 22 000 spontaneous volunteers were recruited by the American Red Cross (ARC) in a span of two weeks (Yükseler and Yazgan, 2023<sup>[73]</sup>). Hurricane Katrina in 2005 resulted in 3 500 daily spontaneous volunteering registrations, with the ARC gathering an additional 50 000 spontaneous volunteers (Department of Homeland Security, 2006<sup>[74]</sup>).

**The recent cost-of-living crisis may also have negative impacts on volunteering.** For example, due to rising costs during and after the pandemic, individuals may be required to work more in paid jobs, leading, for example, to a shortage of volunteers in the United Kingdom, despite an increase in the need for volunteering (NCVO, 2023<sup>[18]</sup>). Additionally, the cost of running a volunteer organisation is also growing (Volunteer Scotland, 2022<sup>[75]</sup>).

**At the same time, other forms of volunteering may be growing.** For example, virtual volunteering has emerged in the wake of COVID-19. Volunteering through online means without any direct physical interaction is becoming increasingly common, with organisations such as Volunteer Canada and Volunteer Ireland recruiting virtual volunteers. Using digital technology, these volunteers are creating websites for organisations, handling paperwork and management support, providing tutoring and offering telephone-based support for seniors to ensure they feel connected and cared for (Volunteer Canada, 2020<sup>[76]</sup>; Volunteer Ireland, n.d.<sup>[77]</sup>).

**Episodic volunteers and corporate volunteers are also increasing.** Episodic volunteers prefer short-term and irregular volunteering opportunities; although they have altruistic motives, flexibility is of most importance for these forms of volunteers (Randle and Reis, 2021<sup>[78]</sup>; Cnaan and Handy, 2005<sup>[79]</sup>). Moreover, corporate volunteering is growing in some countries, whereby individuals volunteer in collaboration with their affiliated companies or not-for-profit organisations (Haski-Leventhal, n.d.<sup>[80]</sup>). Moving forward, further data is needed to understand how these emerging forms of volunteering affect the overall participation rates.

# 3

## Strengthening the volunteering infrastructure to maximise its impacts on local development

**Volunteering is highly influenced not only by individual factors, but also cultural, institutional and governance factors that vary across and within countries.** This section turns to the latter, considering national and local approaches to strengthening the “volunteering infrastructure”. Specifically, it considers approaches such as creating overarching volunteering strategies at regional and local levels, developing enabling legal frameworks, and building a stronger volunteering market.

### Overview of “volunteering infrastructure”

**The volunteering infrastructure is the foundation that supports and enables volunteer activities within a society.** Although there is no universally agreed definition of volunteering infrastructure, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV, 2019<sup>[64]</sup>) defines the concept as “an enabling environment, operational structures and implementation capacities to promote volunteerism, mobilize volunteers and support them in their work.” It includes policies, laws and other legal instruments that define, regulate, protect and incentivise volunteering; volunteer agencies and volunteer centres that support and coordinate volunteers; and implementation measures such as funding or grants, channels of communication and training programmes (United Nations Volunteers (UNV), 2019<sup>[81]</sup>).

**The organisations, actors, policies and systems that are involved in the volunteer infrastructure – which can span from national, regional and local levels – vary depending on the country.** Based on the mapping undertaken in support of this paper, as well as commonalities found by van Den Bos (2014<sup>[65]</sup>) in volunteer infrastructures in selected countries,<sup>3</sup> this paper considers the following dimensions of the volunteering infrastructure in further detail:

- **Developing overarching strategies:** Overarching volunteering strategies, at both national and subnational levels, aim to create a supportive environment for volunteering by assessing and establishing the policies, programmes and budgetary frameworks that address the needs of volunteers and organisations. Typically, strategies involve assessing the current landscape, identifying groups that are not active in volunteering and evaluating the necessary resources for development.
- **Establishing enabling legal frameworks:** A legal framework for volunteering establishes the legal status and protection of volunteers, while setting the parameters for a volunteering infrastructure. Countries take varied approaches: some enact comprehensive, volunteer-specific laws, while others embed volunteer regulations within broader legal frameworks like civil society or labour laws. In some cases, long-standing customs and practices act as a form of self-regulation, filling the gap where official laws may not exist.

- **Strengthening the market for volunteers:** This includes marketing to incentivise volunteers, developing quality volunteering opportunities, intermediation between volunteers and volunteer organisations, as well as cross-cutting approaches.

## Overarching volunteering strategies

**Overarching volunteering strategies help to establish policies, programmes and budgetary frameworks that create a supportive environment for volunteering, i.e. the holistic volunteering infrastructure.** They are often based on consultation with several stakeholders and aim to address concerns of volunteer organisations and volunteers, such as ensuring legal protection, providing adequate resources and enhancing organisational capacities. Such forms of cross-sectoral strategies are also helpful in enabling a common vision, clarifying responsibilities and promoting coordinated action. Furthermore, they introduce tools to recognise and celebrate volunteers' contributions, raise awareness of their positive impact, and encourage broader public participation in volunteering activities.

**Volunteering strategies are typically built around assessing the current volunteering landscape, identifying how to strengthen the volunteering infrastructure and promoting the sector to encourage more civic participation.** This involves mapping who volunteers, identifying the fields in which they participate and pinpointing inactive segments of society. It also includes evaluating both formal and informal volunteering and assessing the existing infrastructure and necessary resources for development.

**The development of volunteering strategies often follows a wide consultation process across different sectors.** Given the range of actors and organisations involved in volunteering ecosystems in any given context, civil society actors, NGOs and associations tend to have a critical role in laying the groundwork for volunteering strategies. For example, in Germany and Canada, associations such as the German National Network for Civil Society and Volunteer Canada have organised extensive consultation processes to help the national government prepare strategies. There is also a diversity of ministries that lead the work on volunteering, ranging from ministries for family affairs (Germany) to social affairs (Australia) and rural and community development (Ireland). In some countries, specialised bodies have been established to address volunteering issues such as the High Council of Volunteers in Belgium and the National Council for Volunteering in Denmark.

**However, national volunteering strategies remain relatively uncommon across OECD countries.** Existing research suggests that Anglo-Saxon countries have been especially active in adopting national strategies, which could be partly attributed to their long histories with civic engagement and volunteerism. In Canada, for example, the first national volunteer strategy was launched as early as 1967 (Volunteer Canada, 2023<sup>[82]</sup>). Presently, Australia and Ireland are among the countries with the most exhaustive strategic documents to encourage and support acts of volunteering and the infrastructure that enables it. Some countries, like New Zealand and Canada, have strategic plans for volunteering prepared by national associations or NGOs, even if not officially adopted by national governments. In some cases, countries have national youth strategies, which include strategic objectives on youth volunteering, such as in the Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania and Spain. Local and regional authorities can also play a crucial role in developing roadmaps to promote volunteerism within their communities (OECD, 2020<sup>[83]</sup>).

**In many cases, subnational authorities have also developed their own roadmaps and frameworks to promote volunteering.** These actors can be just as important in strengthening the ecosystem since they often have the most direct contact with volunteers and volunteer organisations on the ground. Boxes 3.1. and 3.2. below provide more detailed examples about volunteering strategies on both national and subnational levels.

### Box 3.1. Examples of national volunteering strategies

#### **Australia**

The National Strategy for Volunteering, adopted in 2023 and set to run through to 2033, serves as a blueprint for "enabling safe, supported, and sustainable volunteering" in Australia. It was funded by the Department of Social Services and led by Volunteering Australia. A 12-month co-design process went into building the strategy, which was spearheaded by the National Strategy for Volunteering Council and supported by four working groups focused on Corporate Volunteering, Volunteer Management, Volunteering Policy and Volunteering Research.

The document outlines a shared vision for volunteering and pathways to achieving it, centred around three key focus areas. First, volunteering experiences should be made accessible to all, offering enriching opportunities free from exploitation. Second, the diversity and impact of volunteering should be recognised and celebrated. Third, volunteering requires intentional and sustainable leadership, investment, policy conditions, and partnerships, providing the essential foundation for long-term impact. To this end, volunteering is approached as a cross-portfolio issue in the Australian government with several departments covering different aspects of the strategy. The volunteering ecosystem is also boosted with investments on a regular basis.

Source: (Volunteering Australia, 2023<sup>[84]</sup>)

#### **Ireland**

In 2021, the Government of Ireland launched its first National Volunteering Strategy, covering the 2021-2025 period. The government placed special emphasis on stakeholder engagement in the process, and two consultations within the volunteering ecosystem were carried out to prepare the strategy and to convene a National Advisory Group. The strategy sets out as its goal to recognise, promote and grow the volunteering ecosystem in Ireland. It takes stock of diverse forms, groups and sectors involved in volunteering by presenting several case studies from communities across the country. The five objectives identified include increasing participation and diversity in volunteering; developing and supporting the volunteering environment; recognising and celebrating the impact of volunteers; promoting ethical and skills-based international volunteering; and improving policy coherence on volunteering across the government both nationally and locally.

The government has linked the National Volunteering Strategy to a wider effort to support organisations that act as service providers to communities, building bridges between the work on volunteering, community development and social innovation. Accordingly, the Volunteering Strategy is part of a suite of policy initiatives, which also includes A Five-Year Strategy to Support the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland 2019-2024 and the National Policy on Social Enterprise.

While the strategy has been prepared and implemented by the Department of Rural and Community Development, it recognises the important roles other Government Departments, state agencies and sectoral stakeholders have in bringing the plan to life. It also focuses on developing support mechanisms to strengthen the volunteering infrastructure. This includes funding for organisations like Volunteer Ireland, Volunteer Centres and Public Participation Networks (PPNs).

Source: (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2021<sup>[85]</sup>)

### Box 3.2. Examples of subnational volunteering strategies

#### ***Utah, United States***

**Utah, United States** has a strong culture of volunteering, with the highest rate of volunteering in the US (United States Census Bureau, 2023<sup>[86]</sup>). Many factors may contribute, including state level steering. In 1994, the state established UServeUtah, a commission on service and volunteerism which is governed by 20 members representing local government, community-based organisations and statewide networks. UServeUtah's mission is to involve all Utah residents in addressing local challenges through national service, volunteerism and community engagement.

The Serve America Act of 2009, a federal bill designed to expand national service opportunities – including via AmericaCorps – and to support volunteerism in the United States, requires all state commissions to develop an official service plan. The current strategic plan of UServeUtah covers the period 2024-2026 and was created following a public listening tour and survey that gathered input from every county in the state. A cross-sectoral approach was central to the process, with non-profit agencies, businesses, AmeriCorps programmes, as well as students and community volunteers contributing at various stages.

As a result, the strategic plan outlines three focus areas based on the priorities and unmet needs identified by communities. The 2024-2026 strategy focuses on mental health and well-being, access to housing, and promoting volunteerism in local communities. Efforts to engage more people in volunteering are supported by diversifying the benefits offered, creating pathways from volunteering to education and employment, developing tools for formal recognition, and collaborating with educational institutions on service-learning programmes.

Source: (UServeUtah, 2024<sup>[87]</sup>)

#### ***York, United Kingdom***

The 2022-2027 strategic plan for volunteering in York, United Kingdom, is a collaborative effort between representatives from local charities, voluntary organisations, the City of York Council and current and prospective volunteers. The strategy sets out a working definition of volunteering, best practices for its management and tools to ensure equality, diversity and inclusivity in volunteer activities.

Key priorities for the city and its local communities were identified during a round of discussions, aligning volunteering programmes, policies and procedures with York's broader strategic goals. These priorities include poverty, environment, mental health, loneliness, youth engagement, community cohesion and human rights, with particular attention to refugees and asylum seekers.

The strategy also establishes a working group to oversee voluntary action and track city-wide progress. It outlines a detailed action plan and timeline for achieving the goals, such as promoting volunteering, recognising its impact, and implementing monitoring and evaluation systems. Concrete tools to support the strategy include an expenses policy to encourage volunteers from all backgrounds, recruitment fairs at local educational institutions, discount schemes for volunteers from local businesses and the creation of a biennial Volunteering Survey for centralised data collection.

Source: (City Council of York, 2023<sup>[88]</sup>)

## Legal frameworks on volunteering

**Legal frameworks for volunteering can provide recognition of volunteer status, offer legal protection and differentiate volunteering from other forms of labour.** The importance of adopting such legislation has been emphasised by international bodies, including the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA Resolution 56/38) and the Council of Europe (Recommendation No. R (94)4). These frameworks help prevent the exploitation of volunteers and reduce their exposure to undue risks, such as liability. Moreover, clear laws defining the scope and management of volunteering can enhance the development of a strong volunteering infrastructure by helping clarify roles, responsibilities and mandates of different institutions.

**Currently, comprehensive and comparative information on legal frameworks on volunteering is lacking on a global level.** Some comparative studies are available in the European context, but data can often be outdated as governments change and new laws come into effect. Across the OECD, at least 12 countries and the European Union have implemented legislation to provide guidance on volunteering (Gagliardi, Perez-Raynaud and Robinson, Forthcoming<sup>[89]</sup>). For the purpose of this section, a selection of national laws has been made to showcase different legal frameworks that countries have adopted on volunteering.

**A number of countries have dedicated, comprehensive volunteer laws. These laws are especially prevalent in Europe but are also present in countries such as Colombia.** Examples can be found in Austria (2012 Federal Act on the Promotion of Volunteering), Belgium (2005 Act on the Rights of Volunteers), the Czech Republic (2002 Law on Voluntary Services), Colombia (Law No. 720 of 2001), Italy (Framework Law on Volunteering, Law No. 266 of 1991), Lithuania (2011 Law on Volunteering), Slovak Republic (Act 406/2011 on Volunteering 266/1991), Slovenia (2011 Volunteering Act), Spain (Law 45/2015 on Volunteering) and Portugal (Law No. 71 of 1998). Nevertheless, existing data suggest that dedicated laws remain relatively uncommon on a global scale.

**Some countries include regulations affecting volunteering within other laws, such as those related to the social and solidarity economy, civil society organisations or associations (e.g. France, Chile, Japan, Türkiye).** For example, in Japan, volunteering is understood to fall under the 1998 Act on Promotion of Specified Non-profit Activities (Council on Foundations, 2020<sup>[90]</sup>). While the law itself does not directly regulate or mandate volunteering, it supports the broader volunteer ecosystem by providing a legal foundation for the creation and management of volunteer-driven organisations. In 2024, France also adopted a Law on Volunteering and Engagement in Associations (Vie Publique, 2024<sup>[91]</sup>). Every year, over 20 million citizens engage in volunteering activities across the country, mainly through 1.5 million associations which are active in several sectors such as social cohesion and inclusion, culture, sports, etc. In some countries, limits and definitions of volunteering are also embedded in labour laws to distinguish volunteers from formal employees. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the 1998 National Minimum Wage Act explicitly addresses volunteering.

**Finally, there are also countries that have not adopted any legislation for volunteering or have only done so at the subnational level.** Many Nordic countries are examples of places where there are no clear or distinct laws on volunteering. Often, these countries have long-standing customs and practices regarding volunteering and civic life that serve as a form of self-regulation (European Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2014<sup>[92]</sup>).

**When countries have a specific volunteer law, they typically incorporate a legal definition of what activities constitute volunteering and who qualifies as a volunteer.** Although there is no universal consensus on the exact meaning of volunteering, most laws emphasise that it must be undertaken voluntarily, with little or no expectation of compensation, and for the public benefit. Additionally, many of these laws require that volunteering take place through a recognised volunteer organisation. At the European level, institutions such as the European Commission and the European Economic and Social

Committee have adopted a broader concept of volunteering that includes informal volunteering. However, in many countries, including Austria, the Czech Republic and Spain, national laws only recognise formal volunteering conducted through an official volunteer organisation or programme.

**Other aspects of these laws cover the rights and protections for volunteers, such as liability protections and safety regulations, so that volunteers are not unduly exposed to risk.** For instance, in the United States, the Volunteer Protection Act (1997) is primarily concerned with protecting volunteers from unwarranted legal liability. They can also address the responsibilities and duties of both volunteers and the organisations that engage them to promote proper management and support throughout the volunteering cycle. Additionally, they may cover reimbursement and tax implications, offering benefits or exemptions for volunteer-related expenses to the host organisation or the individual volunteer. For example, in Estonia, non-profit associations and foundations that rely on volunteers can benefit from income tax reductions if they are approved by the Tax and Customs Board. This approval enables entities to collect tax-deductible donations from the public and allows their volunteers to claim tax reimbursements (OECD, 2023<sup>[93]</sup>). In other countries, such as Spain, laws can also include a section on the recognition of skills and training acquired through volunteering.

### Box 3.3. Examples of specific legal frameworks on volunteering

#### *The Czech Republic*

**The Czech Republic** enacted its Law on Voluntary Services in 2002. It defines the scope of legally recognised voluntary activity and specifies the conditions under which the state will support them. In the Czech Republic, the tutelage of volunteering and the registry of accreditations is under the purview of the Ministry of the Interior. Only volunteers in listed programmes fall within the scope of the 2002 law, while other informal voluntary activities remain widely practiced but unprotected by it. Additionally, the law is closely linked to other relevant legal codes, such as the Labour Code, social welfare, public health care and tax regulations that have a bearing on volunteering.

Under the Czech Labour Code, volunteering for more than 20 hours per week is recognised as full-time service, which also counts toward eligibility for state welfare benefits. Similarly, the length of time spent volunteering under these conditions is counted for pension insurance contributions. The Public Health-Care Code mandates that the healthcare needs of volunteers participating in accredited projects are largely covered by the state. Moreover, accredited volunteers are exempt from income tax in the case of reimbursements and can deduct the value of their voluntary activities from their tax base as a donation.

Source: (Hadzi-Miceva, 2007<sup>[94]</sup>)

#### *Colombia*

**Colombia's** legal framework for volunteering is primarily governed by the Volunteer Law of 2001. The law establishes the definition of volunteering and recognises organisations that facilitate volunteer work, categorising them into two types: Volunteer Organisations (*Organizaciones de Voluntariado*) and Entities for Voluntary Action (*Entidades con Acción Voluntaria*). The latter are entities that, while not primarily focused on volunteering, are still engaged in voluntary action. This differs from laws in some other OECD countries, where only accredited civil society organisations are recognised under the law. In Colombia, volunteering can take place in public, private and non-profit entities.

The law also outlines the rights and responsibilities of volunteers, including the provision of training for their activities, recognition for their contributions and respectful treatment. Responsibilities include adherence to the organisation's mission and maintaining confidentiality. Additionally, the law

encourages both public and private institutions to actively promote volunteerism, fostering a multi-sectoral approach. Importantly, it mandates that volunteer organisations provide adequate insurance coverage to protect volunteers from potential risks.

Source: (Fundación Universitaria del Área Andina - Sistema Nacional de Voluntariado, 2020<sup>[95]</sup>)

### **Spain**

**Spain's** Law on Volunteering (2015) establishes an extensive framework governing voluntary activities. Similar to the Czech law, it includes a legal definition for a volunteer and mandates that volunteering must be carried out through a recognised volunteering organisation. The law provides a detailed list of fields in which volunteering can take place, and outlines the rights and duties of volunteers, volunteer organisations, and beneficiaries, with a strong emphasis on non-discrimination.

Notably, the law places significant importance on host organisations and excludes universities and companies from the definition. Additionally, it emphasises the limitation that volunteering cannot lead to the replacement of public services or displacement of paid workers. To build continuity and strategic oversight, the law establishes the Interministerial Commission on Volunteering and the National Volunteering Observatory in Spain. Finally, the law highlights the importance of recognising the skills acquired through volunteering, aiding in their acknowledgment when seeking employment. Consequently, an online tool has been established in the country for the recognition of acquired competences through volunteering action.

Source: (Plataforma de Voluntariado de España, 2015<sup>[96]</sup>)

### **United States**

The Volunteer Protection Act (1997) is a **United States** federal law designed to protect volunteers from legal liability when they are acting in good faith and within the scope of their responsibilities for non-profit organisations or government entities. The Act aims to encourage volunteerism by ensuring that individuals are not deterred by the fear of being sued for mistakes or accidents that occur while performing their volunteer duties, provided their actions do not involve gross negligence, intentional misconduct or criminal behavior.

However, it does not protect volunteers from liability if they cause harm through reckless or intentional actions, nor does it shield organisations themselves from being held liable for the actions of their volunteers. The Act also allows states to place additional conditions or limitations on these protections, making it clear that legislative measures and regulations related to volunteering are designed on both national and subnational levels.

Source: (Library of Congress, 1997<sup>[97]</sup>)

## **Strengthening the market for volunteers**

**Strengthening the market for volunteers includes increasing the number of people interested in volunteering (i.e. the supply), enhancing the quantity and quality of volunteering opportunities (i.e. the demand), and improving the efficiency of matching individuals to opportunities.** Boosting supply can involve raising awareness of the personal and societal benefits of volunteering via marketing campaigns, offering incentives, and addressing barriers like time constraints. On the demand side, organisations can create more appealing roles, clearly communicate impact and adapt to diverse volunteer needs. Effective matching can be enhanced through brokerage platforms, including new digital tools, enhancing the management of volunteers, and tailored outreach. For example, at the European level, the

European Capital of Volunteering initiative aims to promote and develop local volunteering via recognising leading municipalities (Box 3.4), while in England, the “Know Your Neighbourhood” programme focuses specifically on disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Box 3.5).

### Box 3.4. “European Volunteering Capital” Competition and Trento, Italy

In Europe, the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV) is promoting and developing volunteering at the local level through the “European Volunteering Capital” competition, which was launched in 2013. The Europe-wide competition aims to promote volunteering at the local level by recognising municipalities that support and strengthen partnerships with volunteer centres and volunteer-involving organisations, and that celebrate the impact generated by volunteers. The initiative serves as an incentive and a source of inspiration for municipalities in Europe to increase efforts to promote and celebrate volunteering, while also keeping current and new volunteers engaged. The competition has taken place every year since 2013, and all municipalities across Europe are eligible to participate. Each municipality is evaluated by a panel of international experts on their strategies, policies and programmes, in relation to the Blueprint for European Volunteering 2030 (BEV2030) and the CEV Volunteering Policy Statements.

Trento, Italy – which boasts over 5 000 volunteers and 660 associations – won the competition in 2024, with the jury recognising the city’s cross-sector collaboration with the University of Trento to measure the financial as well as societal value of volunteering. Even before submitting its candidacy for the competition, Trento had launched its five-year strategy for volunteering in 2023 through a participatory process that engaged various community stakeholders, focusing on four key pillars: enhancing dialogue between volunteers and public administration; strengthening volunteering support, exposure and coordination; increasing youth involvement and awareness; and promoting urban and social regeneration and sustainability. Since the development of the strategy, Trento has hosted volunteer fairs, study visits with other European municipalities, and over 250 events engaging volunteers. The city also organises several working groups, such as a group on competencies, which aims to understand what young volunteers are learning through their work and how those skills can help them in job searches. As such, there is an emphasis on continuous dialogue with various local stakeholders to further promote volunteering in Trento for personal and societal well-being.

Source: (Centre for European Volunteering, 2024<sup>[98]</sup>; Centre for European Volunteering, 2022<sup>[99]</sup>; Trento capitale europea del volontariato, 2024<sup>[100]</sup>)

### Box 3.5. The Know Your Neighbourhood Fund, England, United Kingdom

The Know Your Neighbourhood (KYN) Fund, launched In January 2023, provides up to GBP 30 million to widen participation in volunteering and tackle loneliness in 27 disadvantaged areas across England. Its objectives are to:

- Increase the proportion of people in targeted high-deprivation local authorities who volunteer at least once a month.
- Reduce the proportion of chronically lonely people in targeted high-deprivation local authorities who lack desired level of social connections.
- Build the evidence to identify scalable and sustainable place-based interventions that work to increase regular volunteering and reduce chronic loneliness.
- Enable targeted high-deprivation local authorities, and the local voluntary and community sector in these places, to implement sustainable systems and processes that encourage volunteering and tackling loneliness.

As part of this programme, UK Community Foundations (UKCF) and a consortium of local community foundations across nine local authority areas are delivering initiatives targeted at people who have not had opportunities to volunteer before, or who are experiencing loneliness. Another stream of funding is focused specifically on supporting people to participate in volunteering and connect with others through arts, culture and heritage activities.

The programme also includes a robust evaluation strategy, including quasi-experimental designs and randomised control trials where feasible. A programme-level evaluation encompassed process, impact and value for money strands, while project-level evaluations are being coordinated to collect consistent data and to cover a small number of place-based and thematic evaluation projects.

Source: (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2023<sup>[101]</sup>) and DCMS Presentation to OECD Local Employment and Economic Development Directing Committee (May 2024).

### *Leveraging the role of volunteer centres and organisations*

**At the local level, volunteer centres and volunteer organisations can play an important role in the volunteering infrastructure, particularly strengthening the market for volunteers.** They often utilise combined measures spanning across marketing and outreach, developing volunteering opportunities, conducting volunteer management, training, and matching volunteers with volunteer organisations and vice versa. This section provides an overview of selected approaches by volunteer centres and volunteer organisations. It draws on the broader literature as well as informant interviews conducted in Erlangen (state of Bavaria, Germany) and Brent (London, the United Kingdom).<sup>4</sup>

**Volunteer centres are typically not considered public bodies, but rather independent nonprofit organisations or charities, although they often closely collaborate with local governments and municipalities, such as receiving funding or grants.** Specifically, volunteer centres can help: (1) support volunteers directly by connecting citizens with appropriate volunteering opportunities through information, referral, advice and by developing new opportunities for volunteer effort; (2) provide volunteer administrators with recruitment, consultation, training, networks, good practices and new strategies for volunteer management; and (3) creating the preconditions for civic participation, community development and corporate partnership through advocacy and the development of strategies for governmental volunteering policies, public recognition and capacity building (Bos, 2014<sup>[102]</sup>).

For instance, the **Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) Brent** is a volunteer centre in the London Borough of Brent, actively supporting volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations in the area.<sup>5</sup> First, they support volunteers by matching and distributing them to appropriate volunteering opportunities at local community organisations, while also allowing these volunteer organisations to market their vacancies in CVS Brent's newsletter and on its social media. Second, CVS Brent is currently establishing its own accessible digital volunteering management tool for volunteer administrators and managers among Brent-based organisations, as common management platforms in the United Kingdom are very expensive to implement. The volunteer centre also hires external consultants to conduct one-on-one meetings with local organisations to help them better navigate volunteer management systems, recruitment processes and fundraising initiatives. Third, CVS Brent also brings individuals together for local community development through advocacy and Brent-wide initiatives, such as a "health road show" in collaboration with the different communities. For instance, CVS Brent recently hosted a health road show at Wembley Stadium with the African and Caribbean community. Local community organisations offered free health advice and conducted workshops and panel discussions, while some individuals performed spoken word, among other activities.

**Tailoring to the specificities of the given community is an important aspect of promoting volunteering.** The London Borough of Brent is very diverse, with 64% of its residents having ethnic minority backgrounds (Brent Open Data Portal, 2021<sup>[103]</sup>). As such, there are large numbers of volunteers in Brent who are willing to volunteer within their own communities, such as Brazilians volunteering for Brazilian organisations, as is the case with Somalians, Peruvians and Kenyans, among others. CVS Brent has therefore leveraged this heightened interest among volunteers to implement a project to offer grants of GBP 7 000 for Brent-based cultural community organisations working on ethnic clothing and textiles, as a means for these organisations to further promote and fund volunteer programmes.

**Since administrative and practical support can help keep volunteers engaged, volunteer organisations often have their own management teams or individuals responsible for managing volunteers.** For example, *Ehrenamtliche Flüchtlingsbetreuung* in Erlangen, Germany (EFIE; "Volunteer refugee support in Erlangen") takes a non-hierarchical governance approach, allowing every volunteer to take part in management meetings, which has been essential in promoting volunteering within their local communities.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the *Organisierte Nachbarschaftshilfe Dechsendorf* (OND; "Organised Neighbourhood Assistance Dechsendorf") has nine volunteer managers who are responsible for publishing newsletters, being the contact point for volunteers, organising events, among other things. These organisations also largely rely on services provided by their local volunteer centre in Erlangen city, including legal support, trainings, and city-wide events for volunteers and managers.<sup>7</sup>

**Meanwhile, volunteer organisations also are committed to promoting engagement with current and potential volunteers through various communication tools.** This can range from utilising social media platforms or email newsletters, distributing flyers at universities, making announcements through city offices, as well as holding festivals or public gatherings. In fact, digital approaches such as emailing, social media and texting have proven to be particularly effective for outreach and engagement with volunteers, as well as actively gathering volunteer feedback to empower volunteers and increase retention rates (Waters, 2024<sup>[104]</sup>).

**In Erlangen, volunteer organisations conduct their own unique events or campaigns as means to expand outreach.** For example, Caritas holds second-hand clothing events for the local community, where they also offer free coffee and snacks to have visitors stay and learn more about the organisation's activities through volunteers.<sup>8</sup> *Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland* (BUND; "German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation") employs other approaches, such as membership campaigns by visiting homes and establishing information booths twice a year. They also host parties or meetings among their members to enhance interactions, which has proven successful in securing high volunteer retention rate.<sup>9</sup>

## Offering non-financial incentives

### *Community currencies and time banks*

Another approach to promote volunteering is community currencies, which are local money systems that often “combine economic, social, community, ethical and environmental goals” (Seyfang, 2002<sup>[105]</sup>). A form of community currencies is time banks, which turn unpaid time into time credits to promote mutual volunteering, as these credits can be redeemed for local services such as museum tickets. Since rewarding volunteers with money tends to undermine the motivation behind engaging in volunteer work, while having no incentives at all could impact the continuity of volunteering, community currencies is an example of middle ground.

Research suggests that such currencies can encourage both reward-oriented, as well as no-reward-oriented individuals to volunteer. Although the latter group of volunteers tend to refuse any form of rewards for volunteering, the findings show that since community currencies are different from cash rewards, despite often having monetary value, they can arouse—rather than undermine—the motivation among those with no-reward orientation (Kurita, Yoshida and Miyazaki, 2015<sup>[106]</sup>).

In Germany, approximately 85 organisations have established community currencies, which can be exchanged among one another as well.<sup>10</sup> For example, OND promotes volunteering through a community currency unique to them called *talents*. On average, a volunteer at OND receives 10 *talents* per hour, and as further means to promote volunteering among the local community, an entry bonus of 100 *talents* is provided upon membership enrolment within the organisation. The *talents* can be stored in individual accounts on the OND’s online platform, and can be used in exchange for services, which largely focus on inter-generational support as they centre around addressing needs that individuals across different generations are unable to fulfil independently. For example, younger volunteers may receive homemade jams or hand-knitted socks from the elderly, in exchange for volunteering to support them.

Similar initiatives can also be seen in Japan, where the first community currency appeared in 1973 with the establishment of the Volunteer Labour Bank in Osaka Prefecture (Hughes, 2024<sup>[107]</sup>). Japan is often regarded as one of the most developed countries in terms of community currencies, with a 2020 study finding that 792 community currencies have been issued historically, although they have been in gradual decline since the early 2000s (Hirota, 2011<sup>[108]</sup>; Kobayashi, Miyazaki and Yoshida, 2020<sup>[109]</sup>). In fact, Japan has undergone four phases of community currencies since the 1970s (Maquito, 2021<sup>[110]</sup>). During the first three decades, community currencies were exclusively used to promote volunteering and mutual support among local communities. However, Japan began establishing community currencies for commercial transactions in stores to boost local economies from the early 2000s, which was followed by the third stage during the mid-2000s when additional community currencies were introduced to address social issues, such as environmental conservation. The final phase began in 2015 where community currencies largely became digital, primarily aimed towards economic revitalisation.

A notable example of community currencies in Japan is the *Fureai Kippu* (“Ticket for a caring relationship”). This is a currency system that promotes mutual assistance by enabling volunteers to earn credits – according to the hours volunteered – for engaging in elderly care within their communities. This community currency is reflective of traditional Japanese culture, where mutual help and the belief that “a favour should be repaid with a favour” is of great significance (Network for Monetary Diversity, n.d.<sup>[111]</sup>). Although this model spread nationwide as a means to address Japan’s rapidly aging society, it has declined since 2000, when the Long-Term Care Insurance Act was implemented, as this compulsory social care system marked a significant transition from mutual care within communities towards a greater role played by welfare services in care delivery (Hayashi, 2012<sup>[112]</sup>).

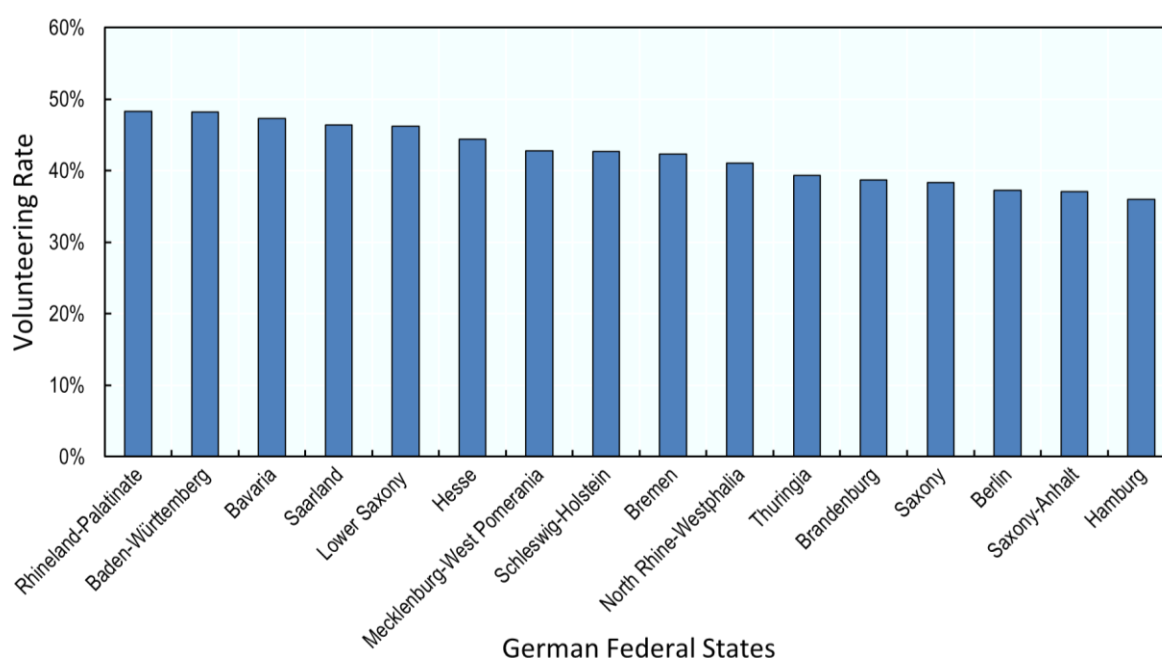
In the United Kingdom, a social enterprise called **Spice** has developed a unique printed currency called **Time Credits**, which can be earned for each hour of service that an individual gives to a **community organisation**. *Time Credits* is the United Kingdom's largest community currency, and it can be spent in the organisation where they earned it or across a network of partners nationwide, such as going swimming for an hour at a local swimming pool or saving credits to go for a boat trip down the Thames River (Lancashire County Council, 2024<sup>[113]</sup>). According to the organisation, this currency model has already reached tens of thousands of people across the country, with more than 1 000 registered partner organisations (Mulgan, 2016<sup>[114]</sup>).

### *Discount cards*

Another prominent example of a non-monetary incentive to promote volunteering are **discount cards**, which include perks such as **free or reduced priced entrance to museums and other local attractions**. For instance, in exchange for specific hours of volunteering a month, Caritas offers cards – provided by the Bavarian state – to volunteers, allowing them to visit exhibitions or concerts for a discount.<sup>11</sup> In Rhineland-Palatinate, which boasts the highest volunteer rate in Germany (see Figure 3.1) with almost half of its population engaging in volunteering, the state has also launched a state-wide volunteer card with monetary benefits to encourage people to volunteer. It has also developed various measures together with municipalities, associations and volunteers to promote the state's cultural heritage for tourism purposes (Brill, n.d.<sup>[115]</sup>; Schafranski, 2020<sup>[116]</sup>).

**Figure 3.1. Volunteer rates across German Federal States**

Percentage of German residents engaging in volunteering aged 14 and above, 2014



Source: Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2017<sup>[117]</sup>), *Volunteering in Germany: Key Findings of the Fourth German Survey on Volunteering*

In some countries, there are also specific efforts to encourage volunteering for younger generations, embedded in civil society and youth strategies or through national youth volunteering and civic service programmes (OECD, 2022<sup>[118]</sup>; Gagliardi, Perez-Raynaud and Robinson,

Forthcoming<sup>[89]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[83]</sup>). The approach is in line with the 2022 OECD Recommendation of the Council on Creating Better Opportunities for Young People, which recommends that adherent countries “provide young people with opportunities that encourage civic engagement and participation, including by promoting meaningful volunteer service and youth work through laws, strategies and programmes, at the appropriate level(s) of government” (OECD, 2022<sup>[119]</sup>). Civic service programmes and service-learning opportunities in schools are two specific examples of approaches to doing so.

### ***Specific efforts targeted at young people***

#### *National volunteering and civic service programmes*

**National volunteering and civic service programmes are common approaches to encourage individuals, particularly young people, to volunteer for communities or specific causes.** They essentially allow participants to conduct “an organised period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national or world community, (...) for which there is only minimal monetary compensation to participants” (Sherraden, 2001<sup>[120]</sup>). While these programmes exist worldwide, they are found particularly in North America and Europe, likely due to the status of the voluntary sector, as well as the levels of economic growth within these regions (McBride, Benítez and Sherraden, 2003<sup>[121]</sup>). Indeed, a positive relationship has been found between having dedicated national youth volunteering and civic service programmes and rates of young people volunteering (Gagliardi, Perez-Raynaud and Robinson, Forthcoming<sup>[89]</sup>).

**In fact, at least 16 OECD countries, as well as the European Union, have put in place a national youth volunteering or civic service programme to encourage volunteering among the younger generation** (Gagliardi, Perez-Raynaud and Robinson, Forthcoming<sup>[89]</sup>). Some notable examples include *Bundesfreiwilligendienst* (BFD; “Federal Volunteer Service”) and *Jugendfreiwilligendienste* (JFD; “Youth Voluntary Services”) in Germany, *Servizio Civile Universale* (UCS; “Universal Civil Service”) in Italy, Volunteer Matters and the National Citizen Service in the United Kingdom, AmeriCorps in the United States, and *Service Civique* (“National Civil Service”) in France (see Box 3.6 for further details on programmes in Germany and Italy).

### Box 3.6. Civic Service Programmes in Germany and Italy

#### Germany: *Bundesfreiwilligendienst* (BFD; “Federal Volunteer Service”)

**Background:** Following the suspension of military conscription in 2011, the mandatory alternative to military service called *Zivildienst* was also abolished, leading the establishment of the BFD, which attempted to replace the lost “complementary” workforce.

**Mission:** The BFD allows both men and women to work for “the common good”, recruiting those who can work full-time in a predominantly hands-on activity within a public interest organisation.

**Target audience:** Individuals of any age and nationality, provided they have completed compulsory education and hold a valid residence permit. Every year, roughly 40 000 young volunteers participate in the programme.

**Fields of service:** Environment, culture, sports, integration and civil defence.

**Length of service:** Assignments can range from 6 months to 24 months, with the average duration of 12 months. Volunteers are expected to work full time (40 hours per week), although those who are 27 and older may work part time for a minimum of 20 hours a week.

**Compensation:** Volunteers are not paid wages, though they receive “pocket money” of EUR 250 to 350, which is paid by the host organisation and subsequently reimbursed by the State.

#### Italy: *Servizio Civile Universale* (UCS; “Universal Civil Service”)

**Background:** Although civic service emerged as an alternative to compulsory military service in 1972, it became an independent and voluntary programme through the establishment of UCS in 2001, and the subsequent abolition of compulsory military service in 2006.

**Mission:** The UCS strives to promote solidarity and cooperation, particularly surrounding “the protection of social rights, personal services and education for peace between peoples”, as well as strengthen “the civic, social, cultural and professional training of young people”.

**Target audience:** Individuals between 18 and 28 of any nationality, provided they have valid residence permits. The programme is rather competitive, with twice as many applicants than places available. In 2019, 42 050 volunteers participated in the UCS.

**Fields of service:** Environment, historical-artistic and cultural, and civil protection, among others.

**Length of service:** Assignments are between 8 and 12 months, and volunteers are expected to work 25 hours per week.

**Compensation:** Volunteers are provided with an allowance of approximately EUR 507 per month.

Source: (Citizen Service Network, 2020<sup>[122]</sup>)

**Civic service programmes differ from the traditional definition of volunteering** (Smith, 2004<sup>[123]</sup>). First, civic service focuses on a substantial and defined period of concentrated, often full-time volunteering commitment, whereas traditional volunteers are generally not full-time with no specific end date for their activities. Second, civic service does not necessarily need to be voluntary, with many individuals being required to undergo these programmes, particularly if they are alternative military schemes. As such, although there is a strong element of overlap, civic service should be understood as a distinct concept to volunteering.

**While many of these civic service programmes were developed as an alternative to military service, others are “stand-alone service programmes in their own right”** (Smith, 2004<sup>[123]</sup>). Volunteer Matters, the United Kingdom’s largest volunteering and training charity, is one such example of these forms of service programmes, offering volunteering opportunities in education, social service, emergency, environment, among many others. Furthermore, Germany’s *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr* (FSJ; “Voluntary Social Year”) and *Freiwilliges Ökologisches Jahr* (FÖJ; “Voluntary Ecological Year”) are also government-funded programmes that did not emerge as an alternative to military service. They are designed for young individuals below the age of 27 to volunteer in various areas such as social care, environment, sports and education (Education Commission of the States, 2014<sup>[124]</sup>).

**Some civic service programmes are also designed to offer volunteering opportunities for individuals with disadvantaged backgrounds, such as granting priority access or providing specific tracks for those facing social or economic difficulties.** For example, the United Kingdom’s Volunteer Matters operates on a non-rejection policy, actively welcoming individuals with criminal records or mental health issues (Smith, 2004<sup>[123]</sup>). Furthermore, the European Solidarity Corps, the European Commission’s youth-focused civic service programme, has a policy framework set by the “Council Recommendation of 5 April 2022 on the mobility of young volunteers across the European Union,” which aims to facilitate volunteering for disadvantaged individuals – such as those facing disabilities, education barriers and socio-economic challenges – by raising awareness and increasing the recognition of skills (European Commission, 2024<sup>[125]</sup>).

**Civic service programmes can have benefits for both individuals involved and societies as a whole.** For example, these programmes offer individuals opportunities to increasingly engage with civil society, build social connections and develop skills, often smoothing pathways into adulthood for young people, while also helping those from disadvantaged backgrounds integrate into civic, social and economic life (Bonnie, Stroud and Breiner, 2015<sup>[126]</sup>). Moreover, a study on AmeriCorps found that civic service programmes can decrease costs while increasing economic benefits to society, such as lower criminal activity rates, reduced unemployment rates and higher educational attainment levels post-participation, among many other benefits (AmeriCorps, 2023<sup>[127]</sup>).

### *School-based volunteering service-learning opportunities*

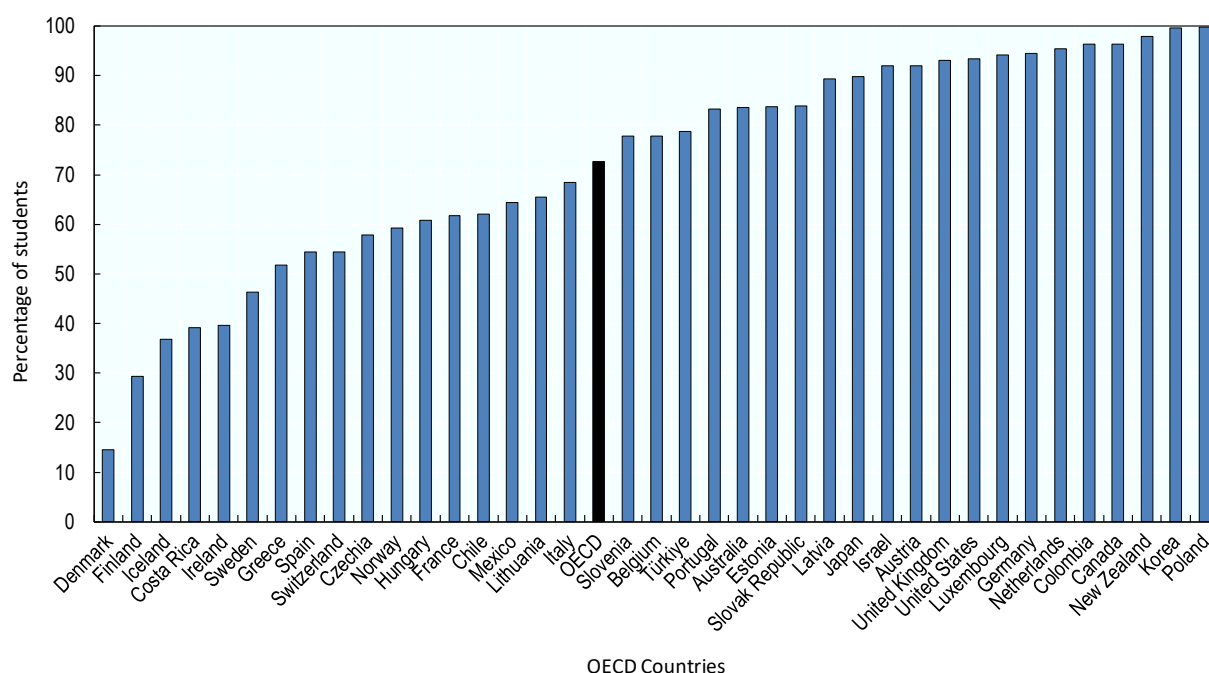
**Schools can also play a significant role in promoting volunteering among young people, through offering volunteering or service-learning opportunities to students.** These opportunities allow students to engage and contribute to the local community, while also developing social and emotional skills (OECD, 2015<sup>[128]</sup>). They also have positive impacts for career development, such as enhancing the students’ real-world application of skills they have learned, as well as improving their cognitive development and critical thinking skills (Wichinsky, 2015<sup>[129]</sup>). Furthermore, there has been correlational evidence that service-learning programmes are particularly beneficial for low-income students and schools, as they reduce achievement gaps between higher and lower income students (Scales and Roehlkepartain, 2024<sup>[130]</sup>).

**Almost three-quarters (73%) of 15-year-olds across OECD countries attended schools that organised volunteering or service activities in 2012, with particularly high rates in Poland and Korea (see Figure 3.2).** In Poland, although volunteering is not compulsory in school curriculums, there are incentives that encourage young people to engage in voluntary work, such as the Education Law which states that points are awarded for those who volunteer, which are considered beneficial when applying for high schools (Calek, 2021<sup>[131]</sup>). As for Korea, volunteering is often implemented in curriculums of both junior high and high schools, based on guidelines set by individual regional education offices, with many universities taking volunteer experiences into account when conducting admissions processes and scholarship screenings (Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education, 2022<sup>[132]</sup>). Citing challenges students faced in meeting the recommended volunteer hours due to COVID-19, the Seoul Metropolitan Office of

Education abolished their guidelines in 2021, leaving it to individual schools to decide whether to mandate volunteering (Park, 2021<sup>[133]</sup>). Although this system has proven successful in increasing volunteer engagement levels among young people and developing educational abilities, there are high rates of discontent, especially because students lack free time amid preparations for college examinations (Ozawa, 2013<sup>[134]</sup>).

**Figure 3.2. Availability of volunteering or service activities at school**

Percentage of 15-year-old students who were in schools that offer volunteering or service activities, 2012



Source: OECD (2013<sup>[135]</sup>), *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful (Volume IV): Resources, Policies and Practices*, 10.1787/9789264201156-en

**More generally, the availability of extracurricular activities, which may include volunteering, as well as how countries organise them, varies** (OECD, 2015<sup>[128]</sup>). Although in the majority of OECD countries local authorities or individual schools lead the organisation of these activities, some countries have formal national or subnational guidelines (OECD, 2017<sup>[136]</sup>). However, it should be noted that any type of mandatory volunteering differs from the ILO definition of volunteering, which emphasises that volunteering should not be compulsory but rather a choice.

**In Japan, mandatory volunteer programmes have been introduced in all public high schools in Tokyo** (Arakawa, Yoshida and Hozumi, 2007<sup>[137]</sup>; Ozawa, 2013<sup>[134]</sup>). Referred to as *houshikatsudo* (“service learning”) in Japanese, volunteering activities were made compulsory by the Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education in 2007, “to enable students to acquire compassion for others and an awareness of being a member of society through supporting welfare facilities and local communities” (Ogura, 2010<sup>[138]</sup>). The programme has enhanced education levels and volunteer levels among young people, largely due to Volunteer Centres established within over 100 universities nationwide, who are primarily responsible for empowering youth volunteerism (Ozawa, 2013<sup>[134]</sup>). However, since these programmes have generally not been well-received by the youth, Japan has been unable to introduce it to other cities across the country.

**Nonetheless, research highlights various positive impacts of compulsory volunteering in schools for students.** For example, students are likely to have higher grade point averages, a desire to continue onto higher education, self-confidence boosts, fewer behavioural issues such as drug abuse and violence, and lower chances of unwanted pregnancies (Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx, 2009<sup>[42]</sup>). Even when mandatory, youth volunteering is also associated with educational attainment and earnings, as it allows students to develop other relevant skills for schooling and employment (Kim and Morgül, 2017<sup>[139]</sup>).

**However, the impact of these programmes on subsequent civic engagement is largely conditional.** A study on high school students from Ontario, Canada – who are required to complete 40 hours of community involvement as a graduation requirement – revealed that whether high school volunteering had strong and consistent impacts depended on how positive their experiences were (Pancer et al., 2007<sup>[140]</sup>). Furthermore, since mandating community service in high school draws students (who would not freely choose otherwise) into the voluntary sector, these service-learning programmes may influence the timing of when a student decides to volunteer, rather than establish lifelong volunteers (Pancer et al., 2007<sup>[140]</sup>; Marks and Jones, 2004<sup>[141]</sup>).

**In fact, cross-country evidence shows that mandating volunteering in school may not increase the likelihood of volunteering as an adult.** A study on the long-term consequences of volunteering during adolescence found that youth volunteering has a positive correlation with adult volunteering, only when performed voluntarily, concluding that mandatory volunteering programmes may not be as effective in fostering longer-term community involvement (Kim and Morgül, 2017<sup>[139]</sup>). Its impacts can also be “detrimental” if specific preconditions are not met, such as whether the student can freely choose which volunteer activity to partake in (Fink, 2019<sup>[142]</sup>). For example, the majority of American high school students who engaged in compulsory volunteering stated that they do not intend to continue in university. In lieu, early socialisation in neighbourhoods and groups such as Girl or Boy Scouts was found to be more significant in increasing the likelihood of future volunteering (Marks and Jones, 2004<sup>[141]</sup>).

**Beyond compulsory youth volunteering, some countries take other approaches to encourage young people to volunteer.** For instance, the 2011 Christchurch earthquake in New Zealand prompted the establishment of the nation’s Student Volunteer Army, a student-led organisation that mobilises students to assist with disaster relief efforts and community projects. Its profound success is fundamentally based on the fact that these individuals are volunteering out of their own accord, highlighting the immense potential for voluntary youth and student-led action following a disaster (Nissen et al., 2021<sup>[143]</sup>). Another example is the #iwill movement in the United Kingdom, established in 2013 and supported by over 1 000 organisations nationwide, which encourages those aged between 10 and 25 to contribute to local communities through volunteering (Iwill Movement, 2024<sup>[144]</sup>).

# 4 Conclusion

**Volunteering is a powerful force in not only addressing pressing social, economic and environmental challenges at the local level, but also enhancing individual well-being and personal development.** With approximately 15% of the world engaging in volunteering at least once or more a month, volunteering is not a niche activity. Moreover, the economic value of volunteering is estimated to be 1.9% of the GDP among OECD countries, illustrating the impact volunteering can have on the economy.

**Although the COVID-19 pandemic has inspired new forms of volunteering such as virtual volunteering, there has been an overall decline in volunteering rates over the past years, with some countries reaching all-time lows.** Despite the downward trend, the multiple levels of benefits stemming from volunteering – such as improved mental and physical well-being, stronger community ties, and its complementary role in public services – remain undeniable, making it essential to continue promoting and supporting volunteerism.

**Amid megatrends such as demographic change, it is of growing importance for national and local governments to promote volunteerism within their communities and strengthen their respective volunteer infrastructures.** Encouraging individuals to volunteer within a solid infrastructure drives greater civic participation at both national and local levels, helping build a more engaged and resilient society. Unlocking the full potential of volunteerism comes with many benefits, from enhancing individual well-being, strengthening social cohesion and empowering people to be agents of change in their communities.

**As such, a robust volunteering infrastructure is critical at both the national and local level, as it serves as the foundation that empowers and facilitates volunteerism within a society, fostering a culture of service.** While each country has different volunteering infrastructures, they often include national or subnational strategies and legal frameworks at the government level, as well as local actors such as volunteer centres and volunteer organisations that implement various measures to further engage volunteers at the community level.

**While this paper demonstrates the importance of volunteering, it has also identified gaps in the current research. Potential areas of further research include:**

- Improving the availability of data on volunteering from both national and local surveys, which are currently inconsistent across countries. More cohesive datasets would allow the identification of trends, including specific differences on the subnational level, as well as allowing more in-depth analysis on issues like frequency of volunteering, new forms, etc.
- Further mapping the national and subnational legal frameworks and overarching strategies to compare approaches and identify best practices.
- Undertaking further comparative analysis on the different ways social economy organisations engage volunteers and their impacts on the sector.
- Undertaking case studies of local communities with particularly high volunteering rates to understand cultural and institutional factors that contribute, and lessons learned for other communities.
- Unpacking gender and age dynamics in volunteering, in order to limit the “burden” that informal volunteering may place on women, such as limiting their availability for paid work.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The United Nations (UN) defines volunteering as “a wide range of activities undertaken of free will, for the general public good, for which monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor (A/RES/56/38)” (United Nations, 2002<sup>[145]</sup>), while the European Charter on the Rights and Responsibilities of Volunteers defines volunteering as activities that are “undertaken for a non-profit cause, benefiting the personal development of the volunteer, who commits their time and energy for the general good without financial reward” (European Commission, 2012<sup>[146]</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> As defined in the 2022 OECD Recommendation of the Council on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation, the social economy, also referred to in some countries as solidarity economy and/or social and solidarity economy, is made up of a set of organisations such as associations, cooperatives, mutual organisations, foundations, and, more recently, social enterprises. In some cases, community-based, grassroots and spontaneous initiatives are part of the social economy in addition to non-profit organisations, the latter group often being referred to as the solidarity economy. The activity of these entities is typically driven by societal objectives, values of solidarity, the primacy of people over capital and, in most cases, by democratic and participative governance.

<sup>3</sup> The United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Italy.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews were conducted with the following: *Ehrenamtliche Flüchtlingsbetreuung in Erlangen* (EFIE; “Volunteer refugee support in Erlangen”) on 7 May 2024; Malteser on 7 May 2024; *Organisierte Nachbarschaftshilfe Dechsendorf* (OND; “Organised Neighbourhood Assistance Dechsendorf”) on 6 May 2024; Caritas Erlangen on 7 May 2024; *Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland* (BUND; “German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation”) on 8 May 2024; Erlangen Stadt on 6 May 2024 and; CVS Brent on 15 March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Per interview with CVS Brent (15 March 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Per interview conducted with EFIE (7 May 2024).

<sup>7</sup> Per interview conducted with OND (6 May 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Per interview conducted with Caritas (7 May 2024).

<sup>9</sup> Per interview conducted with BUND (8 May 2024).

<sup>10</sup> Per interview conducted with OND (6 May 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Per interview with Caritas (7 May 2024).

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