2026 STATE OF THE WORLD'S VOLUNTEERISM REPORT

VOLUNTEERISM AND ITS MEASUREMENTS

UN VOLUNTEERS

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UN VOLUNTEERS

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"The Human Development Report taught us that progress is multidimensional. The GIVE now applies that lesson to volunteerism, capturing the full spectrum of well-being beyond mere economic input."

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"The State of the World's Volunteerism Report gives vital visibility to the indispensable contribution of volunteers, showing why it is so important to finally measure and quantify this undervalued work. Key findings, like the estimate that a third of the working-age global population volunteers, reveal the sheer scale of their impact - even as they navigate risks and threats in crises and wars."

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"We now have a complete, and more comprehensive understanding of volunteerism than was previously provided in documents. This Report successfully integrates quantitative and qualitative analyses, offering new insights to the science of volunteerism."

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"ILO statistical standards and tools ensure comprehensive measurement and comparability. The GIVE builds on this foundation. Its rigorous methodology makes it a great indicator to recognize and follow volunteers' contribution to development worldwide"

Amanda Khozi Mkwashi – United Nations Resident Coordinator in Lesotho and former Chief Executive Officer of Christian Aid.

"Volunteerism is not a transaction of time or skill, but a long-term investment in the relationships and social fabric that nurture the spirit of ubuntu in our communities - where giving and receiving come together to build trust, shared humanity and collective empowerment."

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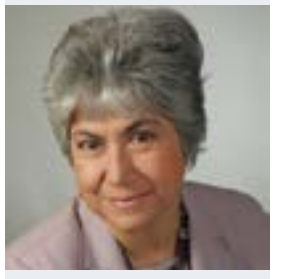
"Measuring the contribution of volunteering to progress and well-being is vital, not to convince but to confirm how much volunteers contribute to peace and development, and to document not just economic but also social benefits to communities and to the individual volunteers themselves. Solidarity is more necessary than ever."



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FOREWORD

Development succeeds when people are at the centre and communities have the agency and opportunity to lead change. Every day, volunteers across the world embody this principle. They bridge the gap between policy and people, connect the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with local realities, and turn intention into action. For the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), volunteerism is not separate from development; it is a vital part of the human infrastructure that sustains progress.

The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report marks a milestone in this effort. It offers new insights into how volunteer action strengthens social cohesion, trust, and collective problem-solving — critical elements for achieving the SDGs. It shows that by recognizing volunteer actions as a strategic and measurable resource, we can better allocate resources, promote community involvement, and foster inclusivity. The report's Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE) also offers governments and partners practical ways to integrate volunteerism into policy, planning, and results frameworks.

UNDP is proud to collaborate with United Nations Volunteers (UNV) to advance this evidence-based approach. Together, we recognize the millions of volunteers whose dedication turns vision into action, ideas into impact, and communities into engines of sustainable development—proving that when people give, our world gains.

Haoliang Xu

Associate Administrator

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

PREFACE

Across the world, volunteers are stepping forward in quiet but determined ways: in villages hit by drought, in cities recovering from conflict, in communities where inequality runs deep. They listen. They organize. And they hold others up when life feels uncertain.

Yet much of what they do remains unseen. Their stories are rarely told. Their impact is seldom measured. And when it isn't seen, it isn't valued. The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report sets out to change that and turns the spotlight on finding better ways to capture what truly counts. Not just the hours given, but the hope built, the trust restored, the lives strengthened.

This Report is both an insight and an invitation:

To see volunteerism not as charity, but as a strength. Not as background noise, but as the rhythm that keeps communities together.

May this report spark new ideas, open new doors, and mark a new chapter, one where volunteerism is not only valued but celebrated for the impact it makes in every community.

Toily Kurbanov

Executive Coordinator

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Marie-France Coco Bleou, UN Volunteer with UNICEF, supports programme monitoring to enhance results for children in Togo.
Credits: UNV 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Volunteer Measurement in a Changing World

Volunteering plays a pivotal role in strengthening communities, supporting public services and advancing the agenda for sustainable development. Every day and everywhere, volunteers are a powerful force for change. Yet, approaches to volunteer measurement have not always captured their diverse contributions, the multiple ways it is organised and enabled, and the different ways it impacts individuals and communities. This means that reliable and comprehensive evidence measuring the value of volunteering remains fragmented, limiting informed policy and investment decisions.

In response, the 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR) brings together the latest research and thinking on volunteer measurement and its role in advancing global development outcomes. The Report explores innovative ways to measure volunteering that are inclusive and capture voices and perspectives from individuals and communities involved in volunteering in all regions of the world.

Better measurement can demonstrate both the benefits and challenges of volunteering, underscoring its importance in today's world while revealing opportunities to improve how organizations, governments, companies, researchers and communities understand and support volunteers. This, in turn, enables stronger advocacy for volunteering, more effective resource allocation and deeper partnerships for sustainable development.

The measurement of volunteering is continuously evolving. The Report shows how diversifying measurement and learning from settings that have historically been ignored can generate new insights and strengthen systematic approaches. Clear, context-specific definitions and purposes of measuring volunteerism, combined with mixed methods enable more meaningful and actionable evidence on volunteering's contributions and impacts. The Report shares practical examples of measurement tools and approaches and how they have been used from the perspectives of states, organizations and volunteers themselves.

The 2026 SWVR also proposes the innovative Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE), outlining four key dimensions to strengthen the generation and use of data on volunteering, providing a unified, yet adaptable assessment of its value to individuals, communities, the economy and the enabling environment for volunteering.

Key Insights

Better evidence is needed to demonstrate the value of volunteering and drive change. Measurement can motivate and empower organizations and volunteers by enabling communities to take ownership of their contributions and share their stories. It also equips decision-makers with information to shape policies, laws and funding priorities. However, more accurate, consistent and systematic measurement is needed to capture the full range of contributions and impact that volunteers make, their lived experiences and the local meaning and value communities attach to volunteering.

Numbers alone do not tell the whole story. Capturing the scale and depth of volunteering requires diverse tools, strategies and innovations. Quantitative data can help understand levels of participation, while qualitative insights can reveal often overlooked dimensions of volunteering including personal growth, social connections, resilience and forms of solidarity. Combining different approaches – reflecting the experiences of both the Global South and Global North – provides more representative

understanding of volunteering worldwide. To support systematic measurement, approaches must be consistent as well as adaptive, inclusive and contextually appropriate.

Measurement serves multiple needs and requires wide involvement. Efforts to generate evidence must acknowledge and address the particular interests and priorities of actors in volunteer measurement, highlighting the need to design measurement for specific purposes and needs, and balance global frameworks with locally grounded approaches. Measuring volunteering is not only a technical task for researchers or statisticians alone. Everyone who believes in the power of volunteering to support stronger, more inclusive communities should be involved.

The Report concludes by providing key recommendations to guide key actors in the advancement of volunteer measurement. Areas for consideration include:

- Clarifying the purpose and limits of volunteer measurement, ensuring findings support learning and accountability.
- Defining, recognizing and considering different forms of volunteering, across contexts and crises.
- Combining measurement approaches; volunteer numbers show scale, qualitative insights add depth and meaning to guide policy and investments.
- Making volunteer measurement inclusive at every stage, from design to dissemination, so its results are trusted and more widely used.
- Embedding volunteer measurement in national statistical frameworks, labour force surveys, reporting on Sustainable Development Goals and ensure alignment with international standards.
- Planning and implementing measurement from the outset, maintaining consistency to capture long-term impacts of volunteering.
- Engaging governments, civil society, private sector, and academia in co-creating measurement systems.
- Designing and conducting measurement in context-specific ways, playing particular attention to missing evidence from the Global South.

Volunteering drives development across sectors in ways that often go unseen. By engaging with the latest global debates on volunteer measurement, the 2026 SWVR shows how the multiple and cross-cutting contributions of volunteering can be fully recognized, understood and mobilized to enable lasting change. Measurement itself can become a dynamic tool for learning, guiding decisions and taking informed action that strengthens communities and supports a fairer, more resilient future.

National UN Community Volunteers support the UNDP's LoGIC project by meeting with beneficiaries in Rangamati to facilitate local climate adaptation solutions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. *Credit: UNV 2024*

1

WHY MEASURING VOLUNTEERING MATTERS

Key messages

- **The work of volunteers is critical when it comes to addressing dynamic and interconnected challenges in an uncertain world.** Volunteers respond to crises, build social cohesion and advance peace and development. However, reliable and comprehensive evidence of their efforts is lacking.
- **Better evidence is needed to demonstrate the value of volunteering and accelerate change.** Accurate measurement can motivate and empower organizations and volunteers. It can also enable communities to take stock of their contributions and stories and can give decision makers information to shape laws, prioritize funding and create enabling environments for volunteering.
- **Measurement serves multiple needs.** It is important to acknowledge and address the particular interests and priorities of those involved in measuring volunteering. Measurement must be designed for specific purposes and balance global frameworks with locally grounded approaches.
- **Numbers alone do not tell the whole story.** Although quantitative data is important, measurement should also reflect personal growth, social connections, community solidarity and other qualitative contributions which are often overlooked. Deeper insights can be reached by combining approaches and methods to measure multiple contributions and impacts.
- **Diverse tools, measurement strategies and innovations drive a forward-looking agenda.** Approaches from around the world are presented to meet the challenge of improving systematic measurement while ensuring approaches are inclusive and contextually appropriate. The Report proposes a Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE). This new index outlines four key dimensions to strengthen the generation and use of data about volunteering, providing a unified yet adaptable assessment of its value to individuals, communities and the economy, as well as the environment which enables it.

1.1. Why this Report and why now?

Risks around the world are escalating and volunteers are on the frontlines of change. From responding to climate emergencies and disasters to tackling deep-seated inequalities, their role in creating social cohesion and accelerating development has never been more essential. And yet, this vital work often remains invisible. Without reliable and comprehensive evidence on the roles, scale and value of volunteering, our understanding of policy remains fragmented and investment decisions remain ill-informed. Consistent and disaggregated data about volunteering is therefore urgently needed – not just to provide evidence of impact, but to enable policymakers to design more effective, inclusive responses and to fully integrate volunteering as a measurable component of national development.

This Report builds on more than a decade of research conducted for the State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR). This research has progressively expanded the global understanding of volunteerism – from its role in promoting social inclusion[1] and strengthening resilience[2] to shaping transformative governance[3] and advancing equality and inclusion.[4] The 2026 SWVR seeks to advance debates around the world on volunteer measurement by tackling the persistent evidence gaps that limit our understanding of the impacts of volunteering and the experiences of many volunteers. In line with previous SWVR cycles, this edition represents a step change, focusing on volunteer measurement, reflecting how conceptual and methodological priorities have evolved over time.

Investments in humanitarian and development work are increasingly results-driven in order to achieve sustainable outcomes. Evidence of the impact of volunteerism is, therefore, essential to shape responsive policies. The Report explores new approaches to capturing volunteer contributions, paying particular attention to informal types of volunteering and the opportunities presented by digital technologies. It also includes voices which are often absent from measurement discussions, particularly those emerging from the growing body of volunteering research and measurement approaches in the Global South.

This chapter introduces the purpose of the Report: to present diverse, practical and inclusive approaches to measuring volunteering. Volunteer measurement is no longer restricted to academic institutions and governments in the Global North. Today, governments, organizations, civil

society and researchers in both the Global North and the Global South are at the forefront of creating innovative ways of measuring the value of volunteering. Volunteers are now not only seen as the subjects of evaluation but are recognized as co-creators of how their work is understood and valued. As a result, there is an increasing understanding that by combining different measurement strategies, more meaningful insights into volunteer contributions can be produced. Measurement tools and approaches that are sensitive to context are important not only to governments, businesses and volunteer organizations, but also to communities and volunteers themselves – those making a difference on a daily basis, regardless of whether their contributions are reflected in existing frameworks. Ultimately, this Report argues that measurement is the tool that transforms these daily acts of solidarity into actionable evidence – evidence that can unlock investment, shape policy and empower volunteers themselves.

The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 2026 as the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development.[5] This Report therefore comes at a critical juncture, directly answering the global call for evidence-based investment in volunteering. Its insights not only celebrate the vast contributions volunteers make on a daily basis but also strive to improve the ways their impact can be measured.

1.1.1. New opportunities for volunteer measurement

Although a critical mass of tools to measure volunteer contributions is emerging, it remains fragmented and not widely accessible **(see chapter 2** for a detailed review of different approaches). Organizations are not always able or willing to share their approaches, while measurement capacities vary considerably between countries and organizations. Historically, measurement approaches have been dominated by research traditions from the Global North, reflecting existing infrastructures and capacities.[6] In some cases, measurement is also viewed in rigid or narrow ways, meaning that important forms of volunteering – particularly those outside formal structures – can be overlooked.[7]

The growth of new public management and market-driven policies in the development sector, particularly since the 1990s, has prompted governments and other institutions to seek new ways of recognizing and

Josee Abou Naoum, national UNV Volunteer with Unicef, monitoring the implementation of psycho-social support session for caregivers in Bednayel, Bekaa, Lebanon.
Credit: UNV 2023

quantifying volunteering, emphasizing its value in monetary terms.[8] While statistics generated from these approaches have helped inform policy and demonstrate the contribution volunteering makes to service delivery and to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of different countries, this approach has tended to sideline community-based forms of solidarity and mutual aid which are most evident in the Global South.[9]

Although the economic and societal benefits of volunteering are interconnected, they have predominantly been documented as stand-alone dimensions of development. As a result, measuring the role of volunteering in community life and solidarity building has received less attention. There is now an increasing emphasis on mixed-method approaches, combining different forms of data collection and analysis to expand knowledge about volunteerism. Such endeavours mark a shift from generic models to region- and context-specific frameworks, integrating local insights from volunteers. This also reflects an increasing focus by academic researchers on how to better recognize community-based volunteer experiences beyond the Global North to inform policy and practice.

In the context of the multiple and interlocking humanitarian, environmental, economic and social crises affecting the world today, the ability to measure

“As UN Volunteers, we provide the link between the data and the people, helping WFP stay accountable in its operations.

Eunice Loforte, UN Volunteer Programme Associate for Emergency Response with World Food Programme (WFP) in Mozambique

volunteering has become key to responding to these compounding challenges in a successful and coordinated way. Disaggregated data on informal volunteering can inform crisis response strategies from governments, local and international organizations in ways that build on existing local solidarity systems. For example, data on how community volunteers self-mobilize during floods or food shortages can inform early warning systems, improve how resources are targeted and ensure that marginalized groups are recognized as active agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries.

Since the launch of the United Nations Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development,[10] there has been growing momentum to promote both quantitative and qualitative measurements of volunteering, supporting government and civil society investments in volunteer engagement to address these global challenges. To build on this momentum, this Report introduces the GIVE to respond to the call for “standards for defining and measuring volunteering”.[11] The GIVE outlines four key dimensions to strengthen how evidence and data on volunteering are generated, interpreted and used:

1) the value of volunteering to the individual volunteer
2) the value of volunteering to society
3) the economic value of volunteering
4) the enabling environment for volunteering

The holistic design of the GIVE moves the conversation beyond simple numbers and aims to demonstrate the multidimensional impact of volunteering. By integrating these four dimensions, the framework directly addresses the long-standing challenges of underrepresentation and gaps in capacity, particularly in the Global South. Crucially, while providing a robust structure, the GIVE also affirms that quantitative measurements alone are insufficient, creating an opportunity to acknowledge the relational and transformative effects that are key to understanding the full value of volunteering’.

While the adage “what is not counted does not count”[12] applies in many contexts, particularly when it comes to comparing statistics on rates of volunteer engagement, it does have its limitations. Not everything about volunteering can be counted, but that does not mean that it should not be considered. Embracing methodological diversity instead of relying on a single approach can advance the inclusive and accurate measurement of volunteering.

1.1.2. Scope and focus of the Report and definitions

Measuring the impact of volunteering depends first and foremost on how volunteering is defined. In turn, measurement shapes perceptions of what counts as volunteering. The Report acknowledges this dynamic and advocates for inclusive, flexible definitions that reflect local values and practices, while supporting the Leave No One Behind agenda.[13] Measurement frameworks should avoid rigid categories, instead adapting to the contexts in which volunteering occurs and promoting equity and inclusivity in assessing volunteer contributions.

In this context, the 2026 SWVR uses the definition of volunteering adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2001 as “a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor.”[14]

The Report presents diverse tools and measurement strategies from around the world, from economic valuation and longitudinal studies to participatory assessments and co-designed metrics. It shares examples of what works from the perspective of states, organizations and volunteers themselves. This is not just about tracking what is going well, it is about using the power of information to reveal the meaning and value of volunteering and to improve volunteer engagement and impact at a time when global crises are overlapping and interconnected.

1.2. Beyond measurement: the power of volunteering

Measurement makes it possible for different interest groups to articulate the value of volunteering to individuals, communities and economies, creating a shared language at a time when recognizing and leveraging these contributions is more critical than ever. Drawing on case studies from around the world, this Report examines how organizations measure development outcomes, as well as longer-term social and behavioural changes linked to volunteering. Knowledge gained from measurement shows how volunteering can help promote individual well-being, foster active citizenship, strengthen community resilience and support public services.[15]

Accurately documenting the value and impact of volunteering makes it possible to identify challenges and address them more effectively, strengthening the ability of volunteers to promote peace and development. Measuring how volunteering succeeds and where challenges arise supports learning and improvement within and across countries. Disaggregated measurement can directly inform crisis planning and development interventions. For example, although many volunteers were mobilized around the world during COVID-19, available data reveals how the pandemic presented more barriers than opportunities for certain groups to access volunteering.[16] Moreover, new strategies are needed to capture the contributions of groups that are often viewed as no more than passive beneficiaries, when in reality they are active agents of change.[17]

Measuring volunteering is not just about collecting data – it can play a meaningful role in motivating and empowering all those involved. For volunteers, it clearly shows the difference their efforts can make, recognizing their contribution and inspiring further participation. It also allows communities to take ownership of their stories, celebrate their contributions and influence future initiatives. For policymakers and leaders, measurement offers valuable insights that can justify greater investment in volunteer initiatives, leading to stronger, more resilient communities. Measuring volunteering, therefore, is not a technical task reserved for researchers and statisticians alone. It is a collective responsibility for everyone invested in building stronger, more inclusive communities.

Patrick Lumumba, a UN Volunteer Associate Data Management Officer in Kasulu, Tanzania.

1.2.1. Different measurement methods for different needs

Effective measurement approaches are context specific. Understanding the institutions and local social norms that shape participation can help create relevant strategies to measure volunteer contributions. No single measurement technique can capture the full diversity of volunteer contributions – each approach will have its own added value as well as its limitations. Quantitative ways of measuring volunteering track how many volunteers are involved in formal activities as part of organizations or government programmes and how many hours they contribute. But this only tells part of the story. Informal or spontaneous acts of volunteering during crises or emergencies often go unrecognized because they do not fit into these ways of tracking data.[18]

To fully understand the impact of volunteering, measurement must also capture what volunteering means personally to those who take part. This covers their motivations, the skills they gain, their personal growth and the connections they make through volunteering. It also means recognizing how volunteering brings communities closer together, builds stronger

relationships and inspires people to take collective action for the common good. These elements are emphasized through the multidimensional GIVE framework **(see chapter 7)**.

Different groups will have different interests and priorities when it comes to measuring volunteering. **Table 1.1** above presents a strategic overview of how measuring volunteering can enable different groups to generate actionable evidence for planning, budgeting and accountability.

1.2.2. A forward-looking agenda for measuring volunteering

The global community faces the dual challenge of improving data systems for systematic measurement while ensuring the process remains inclusive and context sensitive. The GIVE framework proposed by this Report anchors this ambition, providing a unified, adaptable way to integrate volunteerism into policy analysis and global development reporting. To address the challenges posed by unequal capacities for measuring volunteering and the limitations of narrow measurement approaches, this Report particularly emphasizes the need to:

- **Define volunteering and design measurement for specific purposes:** Information about the impact of volunteering on individuals and societies serves different needs, including informing policy, improving volunteer management and showing impact. Exploring how different tools are adapted to fit context-specific definitions and goals reveals how the unique aspects of volunteering can be documented in meaningful and actionable ways.
- **Diversify measurement approaches and showcase innovations from sidelined contexts:** There is an increasing need for measurement tools, approaches and indicators to better reflect the different values, priorities and experiences of those involved in volunteering. Innovative approaches, particularly those emerging from the Global South, offer valuable, locally relevant insights to improve how volunteering is understood and measured.
- **Combine approaches and methods to measure the multiple contributions and impacts of volunteering:** Integrating different types of data and ways of collecting information can provide deeper insights into how volunteering benefits both individuals and societies around the world.

Table 1.1. The value of measuring volunteer contributions

Interest group	Measurement value
Communities whose social norms include volunteering as part of everyday life and/or who benefit from volunteering	· Showcase the impact of volunteering on individuals and communities, promoting learning about different needs · Reveal overlooked types of volunteering and ways to remove barriers for underrepresented groups · Understand and promote the benefits of local volunteering
Volunteers whose work impacts both them and societies	· Help volunteers understand their own impact and how volunteering affects them · Support recognition, advocacy and better support for their work
Governments and policymakers who use volunteering to support local, regional and national development agendas	· Show how volunteers contribute to development at local, national and regional levels · Shape policies, laws, funding decisions and support systems that create enabling environments for volunteering · Highlight the economic value of volunteering and its role in service delivery, education, skills development and employment
Civil society organizations and networks that engage and support volunteers	· Strengthen the design, implementation and impact of volunteer-driven activities · Enable learning opportunities across different organizations · Support volunteer advocacy and campaigns
International organizations that engage and support volunteers	· Provide evidence of volunteers' contributions to achieving development · Support advocacy for the continued integration of volunteering into global development frameworks
Researchers and academics who study volunteering	· Enable deeper analysis of volunteering trends and challenges · Inform evidence-based policy, programme design and decision-making · Strengthen academic interest and broaden understanding of the impact of volunteering on society
The private sector that engages volunteers through corporate social responsibility schemes	· Provide evidence to support increased investment in volunteering through corporate social responsibility initiatives · Show the value of corporate volunteering programmes, strengthening private sector partnerships and their contribution to sustainable development and community support

"Volunteering was never about doing everything. It was about being present where it matters and contributing to something with lasting value.

Riana Wulandari, UN Volunteer Health Officer with UNICEF Indonesia

1.3. How to read this Report

The 2026 SWVR consists of eight separate chapters linked by the theme of measuring volunteerism. It builds on the structure and priorities identified in previous editions of the SWVR. Each chapter and the case studies in them function both as part of the full Report and as stand-alone resources. The collaborative approach taken to writing this SWVR means that each chapter is informed by the authors' own experiences, as well as by case studies from around the world.

The structure and style of the Report are designed to help practitioners, government officials and policy-focused researchers understand and measure volunteering, particularly at a time when interconnected crises demand more agile and evidence-based governance.

The first part of the 2026 SWVR, including this introductory chapter, sets the scene and provides a comprehensive, up-to-date review of why and how to measure different forms of volunteering using various techniques. It also gives an overview of current global estimates of volunteer work.

The second part explores the measurement of volunteering in specific contexts, including the individual impact of volunteering on skills and well-being, the impact on development outcomes and the relevance of measurement frameworks that are fit for purpose in today's era of overlapping crises. These thematic chapters include original case studies sharing the latest thinking and practical examples of how volunteering has been measured in different contexts, with particular attention to the Global South.

The final section introduces the GIVE framework and summarizes the Report's key policy recommendations, concluding with reflections on the future of volunteer measurement.

Structure of the Report

PART 1 **Setting the scene**	**Chapter 1** Why measuring volunteering matters	**Chapter 2** The state-of-the-art of volunteer measurement	**Chapter 3** Global estimates of volunteer work
PART 2 **Volunteer measurement in context**	**Chapter 4** Measuring the impact of volunteering on individual health, well-being, skills and employability	**Chapter 5** Measuring the contributions of volunteering to development	**Chapter 6** Measuring volunteering during multiple global crises
PART 3 **The GIVE and policy recommendations**	**Chapter 7** The Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE)	**Chapter 8** Moving forward: What's next for volunteer measurement?	

Lucile Camille Zoé Moal, UN Volunteer with UN-Habitat, facilitates a participatory planning workshop in Mexico. Her assignment is funded by France.
Credit: UNV 2025

2

THE STATE-OF-THE-ART OF VOLUNTEER MEASUREMENT

Key messages

- **The measurement of volunteering is continuously evolving.** In addition to counting hours and providing economic valuations, the social, environmental, relational and human development outcomes across formal, informal and individual volunteering are increasingly being captured.
- **Different methods reveal diverse insights.** Quantitative approaches to measurement track trends and enable comparability, while qualitative and participatory methods provide information on lived experiences, trust, collaboration and relationships. Numbers persuade scale, while narratives convey meaning.
- **Earlier measurement frameworks** focused on experiences, formal institutions and service delivery in the Global North. More recent work includes perspectives from the Global South, informal and community-led action, and the views of volunteers and communities and is conducted by a diverse range of organizations.
- **At the organizational and programme level, effective measurement operates as a full cycle** of design, production, analysis, reporting and use, supporting assessment, learning and accountability while also informing decisions regarding management capacity, motivation, retention and long-term impacts.
- **The future of volunteer measurement is multifaceted and technology-enabled,** drawing on artificial intelligence, citizen-generated data and co-production, and aligns with broader well-being agendas that extend beyond GDP, while retaining conventional statistical indicators for comparison.

2.1. Introduction

Building on the case made in chapter 1, this chapter provides a critical overview of the state-of-the-art in volunteer measurement, tracing how approaches have evolved from their origins in statistical and economic terms to the holistic, multi-method frameworks increasingly used today. Examples illustrate how measurement objectives and practices have changed, particularly since the 2000s, alongside a growing understanding of volunteering as a force with economic and social value. From this new holistic perspective,[19] measurement has become key to demonstrating that voluntary action generates public value and deserves recognition from citizens and governments.[20]

As established in chapter 1, how volunteering is measured directly affects how it is valued. This chapter delves into the tools themselves, showing how different approaches can shape narratives and influence decisions. While standardized indicators are essential for comparability – one of the goals addressed by the GIVE framework in chapter 7 – it is crucial to understand that no measurement tool is neutral.

Measurement tools and approaches must dynamically evolve and adapt to respond to diverse cultural and organizational contexts. The evolution of complementary measurement techniques continues to follow the core principles of volunteering, such as free will and public benefit. At the same time, wider contexts, new trends and specific needs continue to inform new and progressively standardized and inclusive approaches to measure the contributions of all types of voluntary action, as described in chapter 1.

Early measurement practices focused on counting volunteer hours and inputs. While this quantitative approach is useful, it does not always fully appreciate the outcomes and impacts of volunteering, or its social value in different societies. This chapter therefore explores the potential of qualitative and participatory approaches to capture relational dimensions of volunteering such as trust, collaboration and community impact. Discussion then turns to the purposes of measurement, highlighting how different approaches and tools can serve different needs. These range from supporting organizational efficacy and capacity-building, to enabling learning, innovation and accountability. The chapter concludes by considering the future of volunteer measurement and the importance of not just measurement, but multiple complementary measurements.

2.2. The evolution of volunteer measurement

2.2.1. From counting hours to capturing the diversity of volunteer input

Early systematic efforts to measure volunteering, particularly from the 1980s, focused largely on expressing its value in economic terms.[21] This made it possible to make comparisons between countries and provided decision makers and funders with consistent, comparable data. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work[22] shaped international debates on standardizing how voluntary activities are recorded in terms of hours worked, full-time equivalent positions and their estimated economic value.

More recently, valuation methods have expanded to quantify non-economic benefits in monetary terms. For example, volunteer time contributed through Rotary, an international membership volunteer organization, was estimated to generate annual community savings of approximately US$ 850 million, equivalent to nearly nine times the organization's yearly budget.[23] A different approach, based on UK Treasury-endorsed wellbeing valuation, used Scottish survey data[24] to estimate that individuals who volunteer formally once a week experience improvements in well-being comparable to the life satisfaction effect of an additional US$ 1,270 worth of social value.[25]

These measurement strategies have typically relied on quantitative approaches to determine the added value that volunteering brings to public services, the third sector and the wider social economy.[26] Internationally, this has made it possible to include volunteer work in official statistics (see also chapter 3).[27] However, while essential for establishing scale, these quantitative methods often fail to capture the quality, motivation and relational impacts of volunteering, which are critical to understand its full societal value. Relying solely on this approach runs the risk of reducing volunteering to a mere substitute for paid labour, overlooking its unique contributions to social cohesion and individual well-being.

Despite these limitations, statistics and aggregated data remain important for understanding broad patterns of volunteering. National survey data, for instance, can be used to track trends over time and compare patterns

Johanna Tejada Lopez, UNICEF Panama's GBV and Protection Expert from Colombia, creates safe spaces and provides care for migrant women and girls, leading GBV risk mitigation and survivor support during humanitarian emergencies. *Credit: UNV 2024*

Jamila Mammadli, National UNV Specialist in Azerbaijan, funded by the Special Voluntary Fund supports COP29 coordination. *Credit: UNV 2024*

across regions and countries. The National Survey on Solidarity and Voluntary Action conducted by Mexico has transformed the understanding of volunteering in the country by capturing the scope of volunteering and challenging assumptions about its economic value and social dimensions (see Case Study Box 2.1).

Other large-scale surveys, such as the Civic Participation in China Survey (CPCS), which was conducted in four waves between 2018 and 2024, have found that more years of citizenship education correlate with a more active and participatory view of citizenship.[30] Along the same lines, the AmeriCorps Civic Engagement and Volunteering (CEV) supplement to the US Current Population Survey,[31] conducted biennially and incorporated into federal statistics, provides nationwide data that inform policy and reveal trends such as the rebound of formal volunteering and the rise of informal helping.[32] Russian government statistics track volunteers through two sources managed by the Federal State Statistics Service (ROSSTAT): official labor statistics compiled since 2016 following the ILO methodology, and annual surveys of socially oriented non-profit organizations; the Ministry of Economic Development consolidates this data into annual Reports on the Development of Volunteering in the Russian Federation, currently available for 2017–2023.[33] Large-scale surveys can therefore provide the primary evidence base for government policy, inform public opinion and influence voluntary practices. Quantitative data can convey accessible information for policy work, often attracting the attention of media and the general public. For example, as part of its 2023 National Volunteer Policy,[34] the Government of Bangladesh referred to ILO module data from the Labour Force Survey and to data drawn from the country's Cyclone Preparedness Programme documenting measurable volunteer engagement.

Several funding schemes for civil society organizations, such as the European Union Erasmus+ scheme and others, make it possible for volunteer hours to be counted as co-funding.[35] This practice demonstrates the direct advocacy power of a standardized measurement module that can be used by organizations that engage volunteers for advocacy purposes: any public or private funder can allow volunteering hours to be accepted as in-kind funding. Placing a value on volunteer hours has also been introduced as a standard element in the social accounting of some non-profit institutions.

Box 2.1. Longitudinal measurement of volunteering in Mexico[28]

Measuring volunteering over time can inform policy, programme design and resource allocation for governments, civil society organizations and philanthropists, while also encouraging greater volunteer participation. The National Survey on Solidarity and Voluntary Action (ENSAV) in Mexico exemplifies a pioneering national household survey that tracks patterns and changes in volunteering over time, with over 1,600 responses in each of the four editions that have been published by CIESC (Centro de Investigación y Estudios sobre Sociedad Civil) since 2005. The survey addresses a historical data gap in a country and region where unpaid activities and informal help have not always been recognized as volunteering.

Following its first edition, the survey was reviewed and adapted. Broader questions such as 'Do you volunteer?' were replaced with activity-based queries covering 23 types of participation, excluding family duties. Examples of activities now covered include religious and community-based activities, volunteering in schools, coaching sports and providing skilled labour for local infrastructure. Reported hours are converted into eight-hour days and monetized at minimum wage, with flexibility to adjust for skilled work. These economic estimates are integrated into the country's National Statistical Agency (INEGI) Satellite Account for Non-Profit Institutions, and the databases are available online.[29]

The scope of the survey extends beyond individual volunteering to include corporate volunteering, cash and in-kind giving, and records sociodemographic factors such as age, gender, income and group participation. Its findings have challenged assumptions about volunteering in Mexico, for example the belief that volunteers are mainly women or retirees, revealing instead gender parity and that the most active volunteer group in the country is aged 35-50. The survey also highlights new forms of engagement, including online volunteering, episodic participation and service learning in education.

Although use of this tool remains limited, Expanded Value Added statements can complement organizations' annual financial statements. It does so by assigning an economic value to volunteer contributions and making their role visible in the overall value an organization creates.[36]

While such measurement approaches produce comparable statistics regarding participation rates, such as the number of individuals volunteering and the hours they contribute, they may not fully reflect the actual experience of volunteering. A recent initiative in Jordan illustrates how national frameworks can move beyond input-focused measures by combining economic value with broader indicators around measuring volunteer impact (see Case Study Box 2.2).

Technology expands the possibilities for measurement, especially through real-time or large-scale data collection. For example, smartphones, wearable sensors and digital apps allow volunteers to collect real-time, large-scale data across language barriers and national borders. Volunteer measurement from a citizen science perspective, where citizens actively contribute to data gathering, analysis and interpretation, has expanded the scope of available evidence over the years. Such citizen involvement has, for example supported environmental change through volunteering in the United States[39] and has provided real-time, community-driven data feedback in Afghanistan.[40] Digital platforms also provide cost-effective opportunities to gather data on both the numbers of volunteers and time spent volunteering. In China, over 90 per cent of organizations engaging volunteers use online management systems, enhancing efficiency and opportunities for data collection.[41] However, this shift to online platforms often captures only what is already formalized, structured and easier to monitor, and potentially overlooks forms of community-based volunteering that may remain unrecorded. Challenges around digital literacy may also impact the use of digital tools and platforms in different regions of the world, especially in rural areas. This provides scope for future development to realize the potential digital technology has to track contributions from all types of volunteers at both local and national levels, including through participatory approaches which prioritize volunteer voices in shaping what is measured.

Box 2.2. An integrated collaborative framework for measuring the social and economic impact of volunteering[37]

In Jordan, the National Volunteering Impact Assessment Framework was developed by the Crown Prince Foundation through consultations with the private, public and civil society sectors to provide a unified, scalable and contextually relevant approach to measuring the contributions of volunteers in the country. Theories of Change (ToCs) are developed as part of the framework, drawing on structured data from the National Volunteering and Youth Engagement Platform (Nahno)[38] and national surveys. This approach is designed to guide national efforts towards coherent measurement that enhances the overall impact of voluntary action, while also supporting the identification of indicators to measure outcomes and impact at the national level.

The ToCs demonstrate how volunteering activities contribute to measurable social and economic outcomes, including quality of life, workforce readiness, skills development, civic engagement and economic productivity. These ToCs establish a unified national system for assessing the impact of volunteering, providing an evidence-based approach to understanding it at individual, community and national levels. By linking volunteer engagement to outcomes such as employment and civic participation, ToCs quantify the socioeconomic value of volunteering. These insights are integrated into national policies and strategies for employment and social development, enhancing the country's approach to leveraging volunteering for sustainable development.

The impact assessment framework also encompasses multiple measurement models, including economic valuation, longitudinal surveys and qualitative analysis, and proposes impact rating models that allow for flexibility in data interpretation. Combining these diverse methods enables national frameworks to capture both immediate outcomes and long-term impacts, integrating structured data collection and comparative analysis into a comprehensive measurement system.

Figure 2.1. The scales of volunteer measurement

	Scope of measurement		
	National level	**Programme level**	**Organizational level**
Organizers of voluntary activities			
Voluntary associations		•	•
Non-profit institutions		•	•
Educational institutions		•	•
Corporate entities		•	•
Public institutions			
Government entities	•		
Local administrators		•	
Community-level networks		•	
Infrastructural bodies			
Statistical agencies	•	•	•
Research institutions	•	•	•
Volunteer support centres	•	•	•

2.2.2. Beyond the numbers: participatory and qualitative approaches to measuring volunteering outcomes

In contrast to highly standardized quantitative surveys, the value and impact of voluntary activities have often been reported by volunteers, organizations, advocates and researchers, through in-depth qualitative studies and narrative accounts. Qualitative approaches are particularly useful for analysing the less tangible effects of volunteering, offering rich, context-specific insights that can deepen understanding of the impact of volunteers' efforts around the world. But isolated experiences are difficult to standardize and compare in the absence of a shared reference framework, and the potential for demonstrating the value of these experiences of volunteering has been under-estimated in the policy arena.

Multidisciplinary contributions from psychology, public health, economics, sociology, law, political science, public policy, human geography and development studies have helped to build a fuller picture of volunteering and its meanings, dimensions and contributions, including minority perspectives and different worldviews. Organizations operating at all scales have led to the development of volunteer measurement through practice, experimentation and adaptation of measurement approaches to their respective local policy and cultural contexts. Institutions of various kinds produce evidence about voluntary activities and their impacts as part of fulfilling their missions. For example, volunteering organizations do so in order to report to their stakeholders and improve their operations, public institutions collect evidence to better understand their constituencies and bodies such as statistical agencies and research institutions gather data to support the roles of different interest groups in the volunteering and development sector. These diverse sources of data are generated at multiple levels (see Figure 2.1), including at the national level, through

surveys and other types of wider studies, at programme level, referring to specific services, projects or territories, and at the organizational level, most often through annual or outcome-based reports. Taken together, these detailed measurements across different scales create a rich repertory of measurement practices and results. However, their potential use in advocacy is often limited by the lack of overarching comparable terms of reference. The GIVE framework proposed in this Report helps to bridge this gap **(see chapter 7)**.

These diverse efforts at constant learning and adapting represent a powerful source of information about the contributions volunteering makes to sustainable development, including building volunteering networks worldwide. For example, when the Philippine Government assessed its Volunteers for Information and Development Assistance Program (VIDA), it applied a public value framework. This conceptual lens gauges how public initiatives create value for society by aligning government performance with the common good. Using this framework, the VIDA assessment evaluated its impact on partner institutions, communities and the volunteers themselves,[42] by adopting a collaborative community-based model and analysing volunteer contributions in relation to local development outcomes, programme management effectiveness and trust building.[43] In this way, it worked across different dimensions of volunteering contributions, bringing them together to better understand and measure value. In another example, the Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) has been measuring citizens' involvement in volunteering and philanthropy since 2008 to understand their willingness to help, identify different types of volunteering, and explore the role of nonprofit organizations in organizing volunteer activities.[44]

Volunteers and communities who are directly involved in the causes they serve are great sources of expert knowledge. Without their input, measurement can miss important and often-overlooked volunteering contributions and experiences (see Case Study Box 2.3).

Qualitative analysis of accounts from volunteers at the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MKBM), an initiative in Indonesia which aims to support transitions between higher education and the world of work, has provided

Box 2.3. Whose perspectives? A 360-degree approach to measuring the impact of volunteering[45]

Volunteer measurement is more than simply evidence-gathering. It can help strengthen relationships, build mutual respect and support a shift from one-sided aid narratives which cast people as either givers or receivers. Integrating views from volunteers, partner organizations and community members is key to assessing the full impact of volunteering. The 360-degree approach adopted by Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) includes tools that combine quantitative and qualitative data from all relevant interest groups in places where its volunteers work in Asia and the Pacific.

In designing this measurement system, VSA drew on key research frameworks,[46] as well as findings on the value of repositioning international volunteers as co-learners in development. This shift has led to new reporting mechanisms that track changes in skills, capacity and development outcomes across different groups. Self-assessment tools use both numerical scores and reflections from volunteers and partner organizations over time using a five-point rating scale focusing on key indicators. For example, volunteers rate their understanding of international development, while counterparts and partner organizations rate their organizational capabilities, such as the ability to provide high-quality services and programmes to the community. Volunteers also submit assessment reports following formal professional development sessions. The data collated is reported back to stakeholders at the end of the exercise.

When used at key points during assignments, these tools enable organizations to track whether, how and for whom change has taken place. This helps reveal long-term growth, such as organizational development and increased skills or confidence among partners and volunteers, as well as challenges that need to be addressed.

Participatory data-collection tools rooted in Pacific cultural practices, such as Talanoa in Tonga and storian in Vanuatu, have also allowed partner organizations and community members to measure the impact of volunteering through storytelling in their preferred languages. Results show that volunteering indirectly improves services and opportunities for local communities as well as strengthening relationships and building public diplomacy.

Smartphones, wearable sensors and digital apps allow volunteers to collect real-time, large-scale data across language barriers and national borders.

evidence on how the programme fosters social responsibility, global learning and skills development. It achieved this by not only measuring participation rates but also capturing the perspectives of volunteers on the challenges they face in relation to adjustment, resources and balancing academic commitments with their volunteering.[47]

Storytelling approaches consider written and visual narratives from those directly involved as evidence of change through volunteering, capturing volunteerism within the wider landscape of development efforts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'Volunteer Stories' platform in Bangladesh collected accounts from over 500 volunteers across different sectors, creating a resource that documented their contributions and motivated further engagement (see also Case Study Box 6.2. in chapter 6).[48] When shared, stories can also engage audiences on an emotional level and inspire further action.

The Most Significant Change approach uses structured storytelling[49] and has been adapted in many countries to better understand the impact of volunteering. Unité, the Swiss platform for international volunteer cooperation, applied this strategy to assess the effects of its volunteer development activities in Latin America and Africa.[50] Participants share stories of significant changes from their own point of view and, through their answers, organizations can capture both the outcomes of volunteering and insights into what stakeholders value in the change process.[51]

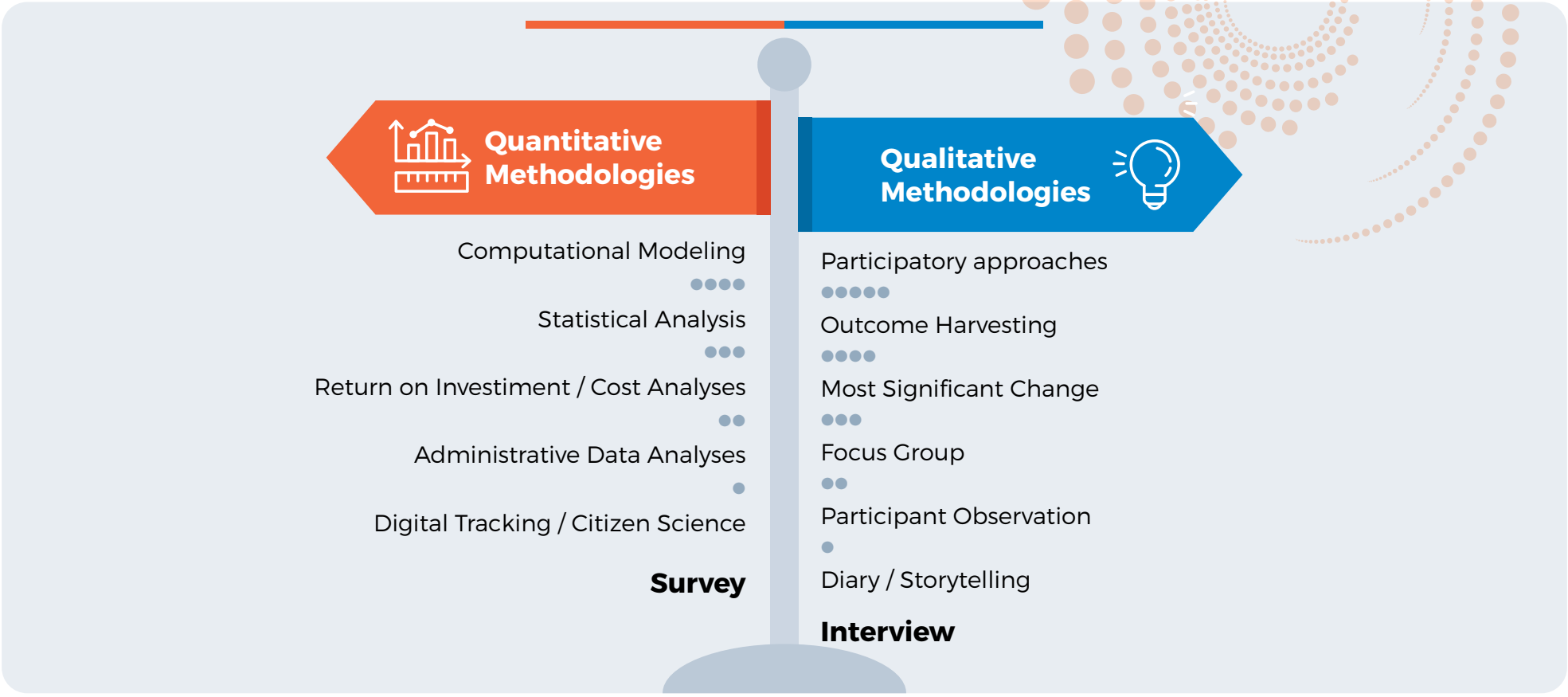
Ethnographic observation, including participant observation, allows issues of power and voice to be better understood when assessing volunteering and development, as suggested by studies conducted in Burundi, the Philippines and Sierra Leone.[52] In Italy, this approach was used with health professionals and volunteers to examine care, resistance and their impacts on service users and volunteers, particularly those providing refugee and migrant care (see also Case Study Box 5.2 in chapter 5).[53] This kind of approach can ensure sensitivity to the ways in which power relations shape volunteering experiences and impacts.

Outcome harvesting is an evaluation method in which 'harvesters' draft outcome descriptions, collect data from informants and work with independent verifiers.[54] In the context of volunteering, it can be used to assess transformational change by identifying how volunteer contributions and programme elements shape outcomes.[55] The Canadian organization Solidarité Union Coopération (SUCO) applied this approach in its voluntary cooperation programme across eight countries to support local partners.[56] Because outcome harvesting focuses on contribution rather than attribution, it is particularly useful for assessing volunteer initiatives in complex settings where direct causal links between activities and planned results are subject to various factors.

One key challenge of qualitative and participatory approaches is their context specificity. Although it is not always easy to scale up and ensure comparability, with adequate resources and frameworks it is possible to pool evidence and generate broader insights while retaining local relevance. The National Volunteer Network of Kazakhstan has established a robust system which combines the annual collection of quantitative data with story gathering.[57] Combined evidence provides a convincing representation of the value of volunteering at national and international events.

Participatory and qualitative approaches are increasingly pursued by voluntary organizations and researchers. They incorporate community processes, perspectives and needs from the outset and, together with advances in quantitative methods, continue to shape and expand volunteer measurement in ways that reflect real-life experience. Chapter 4 illustrates how many of these qualitative and participatory tools are being

Figure 2.2. Repertoire of measurement tools and approaches



applied to measure health, well-being and employability outcomes at the individual level. Examples demonstrate how qualitative accounts, often underappreciated and dismissed as anecdotal or 'non-evidence-based' by policymakers and funders, can integrate or substitute standardized value-for-money approaches.

2.3. Measurement for different purposes

The historical focus on economic dimensions and formal volunteering, driven by institutions in the Global North, has created known disparities. In response, concerted efforts have been made in recent years by researchers and international networks to counterbalance this bias by promoting data collection on informal action, producing research in the Global South and championing participatory assessment.

Developments in measurement debates have encouraged the integration of both quantitative and qualitative approaches.[58] Quantitative measures are particularly well suited and highly refined in public policy and management approaches to determining efficiencies in public services resulting from volunteering. Qualitative methods, by contrast, can capture how communities are shaped, how trust-based relationships develop, how lives change and what lessons have been learned. Both traditions are expanding the repertoire of techniques and standardized digital tools and can be used in participatory ways, not only for gathering and generating evidence, but also for defining measurement objectives and discussing and using the results. The choice of measurement tools and processes within this wide repertoire (see Figure 2.2) depends on the resources and objectives of those undertaking the measurement. Finding the right methodological balance requires clarity about the purpose of the measurement exercise.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of my work is amplifying the voices of women volunteers. Long after aid agencies leave, it is community volunteers, mostly women who continue to provide care, lead resilience efforts, and hold communities together. Yet too often, their contributions remain invisible. I see my role as making sure these women aren't just acknowledged—they lead their communities, their lives.

Kudakwashe Sigobodhla, UN Volunteer Emergency Response Officer with UN Women in Zimbabwe

Importantly, measurement is not an end in itself but a means of making the outcomes of volunteering visible and valued. The perspectives of those conducting the measurements should not be assumed to be entirely objective or universally valid. Methods work best when they are used transparently and are adapted to different cultural and organizational contexts, extending beyond academic debates. This applies to statistical approaches as well as to qualitative and participatory ones. The same point extends to results: the value of volunteer measurement increases when evidence is shared openly and is subject to critical review.

2.3.1. Understanding organizational needs and capacities

Most organizations measure volunteering for practical purposes, often as part of internal assessments and research to better understand the conditions under which volunteers operate, the results they achieve and the impact they have. Some also translate inputs, such as salaries and hours, into costs. Paying attention to context and to different accounting units, such as time spent volunteering or the activity volunteers undertake, helps clarify how these factors enable or hinder volunteer motivation and retention. In turn, findings can lead to improvements in organizational performance and enhance outcomes for volunteers and communities, while inspiring others to take action.

The Index for Volunteer Engagement (IVE) is a research-based self-assessment tool developed by AmeriCorps and its partners to measure and improve volunteer engagement across North American organizations.[59] Data from over 200 organizations reveal insights into volunteer management practices, organizational capacity and the economic value of volunteer contributions. The IVE not only assesses current volunteer engagement but also guides programme improvement and training. The results are used for both programming and organizational development, illustrating that voluntary inputs can simultaneously contribute to measurement at different levels.

At the organizational, programme and community level, the contributions of volunteering are often measured through mandatory reporting tied to public and private funding. The push to demonstrate impact, efficiency and sustainability, largely driven by international organizations and donors, has traditionally cascaded down to local administrations and service-delivery agencies that engage volunteers. At the same time, a growing body of culturally diverse perspectives explores motivations, impacts on volunteers themselves and the contributions of volunteering to building stronger communities – aspects that can be overlooked when volunteering is accounted for mainly through governance and administrative frameworks.[60]

One major contribution that funder-driven evaluation practices make is towards building the capacity of organizations which engage volunteers to design and critically reflect on their interventions. This can clarify outcomes and shift the focus beyond simply tracking activities and outputs. Beyond formal and mandatory reporting proceedings, these outcomes can inform discussions with beneficiaries and decision makers, emphasizing the long-term social impacts of voluntary action.

Effective measurement of programmes and interventions means ensuring that volunteers are heard alongside staff, public officials and community representatives. Excluding volunteer voices can weaken explanations of how and why interventions work and can distort the true implementation costs if volunteer contributions are not accurately calculated. For example, in the Evaluation of Capacity Building Programme (eCAP),[61] developed by the Global Health Institute at the American University of Beirut, volunteers were not explicitly involved despite their critical roles in crises contexts. This can produce an incomplete picture of action on global health, especially when volunteers may already be contributing in ways that have previously been invisible.[62] Improving the capacity of organizations and programmes to measure volunteer contributions offers a clear opportunity to advance this debate globally.

Recognizing volunteering as a form of care and social influence highlights the need for tools that capture its qualitative impacts on relationships and power relations. For example, the Scouts for SDGs initiative by World Scouting measured volunteer impact not only through quantitative data such as service hours and reach, but also through qualitative indicators including satisfaction, role clarity, motivation, inclusion and emotional connection[63] (see also Case Study Box 5.4 in chapter 5).[64] In another case, a comparative study on the factors that influence volunteering among older Koreans in South Korea and in the United States[65] using a structured questionnaire, found that cultural factors (e.g. values and attitudes) and social resources (e.g. social support and networks) were strong predictors of volunteering only among immigrants, while education and financial status were determining factors in both the immigrant and non-immigrant groups.

The Total Value Model illustrates how a mixed-methods measurement approach can help organizations understand their needs and capacities while capturing the full value of corporate volunteering for employees, companies and communities (see Case Study Box 2.4).

2.3.2. Using results for learning and accountability

Effective volunteer measurement processes comprise a full cycle of data production, documentation, analysis, reporting and usage, and must be designed and managed accordingly, whether for a large international study or a single voluntary organization. Evidence about volunteering generated by a mix of methodologies helps tailor messaging to different audiences and purposes (see Table 2.3).

Measurement does not end with data analysis – it comes to life only when results are shared, debated and put into action. Policymakers, funders, partners and supporters, citizens and volunteers may all be audiences for volunteer measurement data and their needs for that data are not static. They are also important interest groups, who can serve as valuable contributors to the volunteer measurement processes. The principles of co-design and co-management involving stakeholders apply to measurement approaches as well as to programming. The voices of volunteers and key informants from target groups and communities are central to this process.

Box 2.4. The Total Value Model: Measurement in practice to understand the value of corporate volunteering programmes[66]

Effectively measuring the value of corporate volunteering programmes means looking beyond participation rates to understand their influence on employee engagement, organizational outcomes and local communities. The Total Value Model, implemented by Voluntare,[67] a network to promote corporate volunteering in Spain and Latin America, integrates quantitative and qualitative dimensions to provide deeper insights into how volunteering contributes to employee experience, well-being, personal and professional development, workplace culture, corporate goals and social impact.

Structured surveys provided quantifiable evidence (e.g. participation levels, hours and pre- and post-volunteer engagement trends across employee groups). This enables companies to express the return on investment of volunteering in terms of human resources, linking it to retention and productivity. Interviews revealed why employees volunteered, how the experience strengthened their sense of belonging, purpose and leadership skills, and the benefits it created for companies and communities.

This mixed-methods approach translated data into organizational insight. The study also included examples of specific volunteering initiatives identifying actors, activities and social and organizational impacts. The results showed enhanced community well-being and skills transfer, serving as persuasive evidence for decision-making to invest in volunteer programmes.

Evidence from the Total Value Model highlighted three organizational benefits: increased internal recognition for volunteering, alignment with corporate goals (e.g. retention, leadership development, Corporate Social Responsibility), and strategic alignment with community needs. When organizational measurement is performed as part of activities that engage with the people, objectives and challenges of the local area, it can help to transform perceptions, showing volunteering as a catalyst for engagement, cohesion, productivity and social change, transforming it into a core business strategy.

Finding the right methodological balance requires clarity about the purpose of the exercise.

Table 2.3. Embedding participatory approaches at different stages of the measurement cycle

Measurement stage	Who to engage	Example of a participatory approach	Added value
Full cycle	All interest groups	Participatory action research	Strengthens ownership, accountability and sustained engagement throughout the process
Co-design	Community members, volunteers, staff of the organization, partners, policymakers	Design thinking workshops	Ensures user-centred, context-relevant measurement solutions
Data collection	Community members, volunteers, staff of the organization	Photovoice	Empowers participants to shape narratives and contribute directly to evidence generation
Data analysis	Community members, volunteers, staff of the organization	Learning circles	Reveals local insights and tacit knowledge often missed by analysis
Data use	Policymakers, volunteers, communities	Sense-making sessions	Builds shared understanding and identifies collective actions or policy responses

For example, the Measuring Impact for Learning and Empowerment framework used by VSO Tanzania uses forward accountability, a participatory approach that engages primary actors, partners, staff and volunteers in assessing the impact of volunteering, emphasizing shared responsibility and continuous learning to improve future outcomes. Through co-learning and learning circles, participants interpret data, build understanding and inform decisions. This framework has been applied to identify volunteer contributions to youth development.[68] Increasingly, participatory methods are being recognized as an additional measurement tool to include, empower and demonstrate the distinctive nature of volunteering. In the United Kingdom, the Teams and Dunston Alive (TADA) initiative, a volunteer-led systems-change project in one of the country's most deprived areas, focuses on understanding needs and creating safe spaces through relationships built by volunteering. Measurement takes place by mobilizing community members and volunteers through listening, trust and reciprocity, producing bottom-up strategies to document local impact.[69]

Measuring these aspects helps generate credible data that not only support programme objectives but also strengthen public recognition of the contribution volunteering makes to social cohesion beyond a simple crisis response (see also chapter 6). As global policy and social science increasingly move towards more intercultural and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding volunteering and development, the value of measurement, arrived at through multiple approaches, becomes clearer.

Capturing the features of volunteering that are not one-off activities reveals how volunteer organizations can create a pathway towards sustainability over time, strengthening individual and community resilience. This can also create ownership of measurement processes. In Jordan, the 'We Love Reading' community volunteer programme was measured using participatory Fuzzy Cognitive Mapping with Syrian and Jordanian women, with results showing the impact of volunteering on different dimensions of empowerment (e.g. cultural, financial and psychological) and related gains in life satisfaction.[70] In accounting for the measurement results generated through qualitative approaches, it is vitally important to rigorously document and transparently report on methodologies and procedures for gathering and analysing data. This means the measurement modules can be replicated at different times and in different spaces and contexts, making even a small local exercise potentially comparable on the global scale.

A capability approach to measuring volunteering shows that both individual resources (such as human, social and economic capital) and wider economic, political, social and religious contexts, shape people's ability to volunteer. Drawing on data from Europe, some studies have highlighted how supportive policies can enhance these capabilities and expand volunteering.[71] The current drive to develop measurements and guidance for recognizing excellence in volunteering is reflected in the global policy arena, shaping global standards that promote impactful and responsible volunteering with measurable outcomes.[72] However, because none of these initiatives are mandatory, only a small number of countries support structured measurement schemes, which then reduces the scope for comparison.

2.4. Conclusion

Volunteer measurement has evolved from its focus on inputs, economic value and statistical measurement, to encompass an ever-expanding range of volunteering outcomes and impacts. This fits within a much wider movement led by economists and statisticians to expand the metrics of well-being and progress beyond GDP.[73]

And the people who are measuring volunteering have also changed. As well as universities and statistical offices, civil society organizations, government ministries and volunteers themselves are increasingly involved in assessing the value, impact and contributions of volunteering. Each of these actors has a specific role to play, drawing on their particular strengths. Statistical and research institutions can build shared frameworks and devise useful indicators and methodological guidelines that can be used by different data producers in different contexts. Governments and international bodies can institutionalize operational standards and sustain and disseminate grassroots measurement efforts. International volunteering networks and volunteer support centres can nurture context appropriateness and identify global emerging trends. Volunteers and the organizations that engage them can not only shape measurement processes but use measurement outcomes to improve policies and practices.

Innovations in volunteer measurement are creating approaches that reflect local contexts and needs. Technology and digital tools, including artificial intelligence and citizen science, will play an increasingly important role in volunteer measurement. While the digital divide remains a challenge, particularly in the Global South, methods from environmental monitoring, social ecology and digital community reporting approaches[74] show how innovation can expand the evidence base and make volunteer contributions more visible. Digital storytelling shows how low-resource approaches can continue to generate evidence for future advocacy on volunteering and development.

National UN Youth Volunteer Lina Toubasi, Humanitarian Field Support Assistant with OCHA in Ramallah in the State of Palestine Works with communities and vulnerable people on assessing their needs and creating a response plan. *Credit: UNV 2023*

3

GLOBAL ESTIMATES OF VOLUNTEER WORK

Key messages

- **Globally, some 34.5 per cent of working-age people, or 2.1 billion individuals, engage in volunteer work each month,** according to new data-collection efforts and improved measurement tools that are providing a better understanding of the scale of volunteer engagement worldwide.
- **Africa records the highest rate of monthly volunteer work,** with 58.5 per cent of working-age individuals in the region engaging in volunteer work activities.
- **Volunteer work is estimated to be more prevalent among men than among women,** especially in regions of the world where women have fewer opportunities to engage in activities outside the home. However, there are wider gendered patterns in volunteering more broadly.
- **Most volunteer work continues to be carried out directly, as opposed to through organizations.** Globally, 25 per cent of working-age individuals are estimated to engage in direct volunteer work, compared to only 11.7 per cent who engage in organization-based volunteer work.
- In the future, the production of **new comparable estimates of volunteer work rates will strongly depend on ongoing and improved measurements** of volunteer work engagement across the world.

3.1. Introduction

Understanding of the global scale, nature and impact of volunteer work remains limited. Key questions remain, such as how many people volunteer and in what ways. Answering these questions requires robust, comparable and timely data. This is more than an academic exercise – it is a strategic necessity. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly demonstrated that communities rely on informal volunteer networks for survival and support when formal systems are strained or absent.[75]

The link to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is more critical than ever. Volunteerism is recognized as a powerful and cross-cutting means of implementing the entire Agenda. New estimates provide a much-needed baseline to advocate for the greater inclusion of volunteerism in national development strategies and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Its contributions have often been under-reported and undervalued.

This chapter builds on previous initiatives to provide new estimates of volunteer engagement at both global and regional levels. Although progress has been made in measuring volunteer work at the national level, estimating the total number of volunteers around the world within a given period remains a complex undertaking. As discussed in different chapters of this Report, volunteer work is diverse, encompassing a wide range of activities and modalities, from structured engagements to spontaneous acts of solidarity. Its form varies significantly depending on local contexts, cultural traditions, governance structures and resource availability. Consequently, there is no universal agreement on what constitutes volunteer work and definitions often differ from one country to another **(see chapter 2)**. Such challenges can affect the accuracy of national accounts and labour statistics in representing the extent of volunteering.

As indicated in chapter 1, the 2026 SWVR takes a broad approach, following the United Nations General Assembly, which defined it in 2001 as "a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor."[76] This definition serves as the general framework for this Report **(see chapter 1)** and the guiding principle for the GIVE **(see chapter 7)**. It encompasses a wider range of activities for the public good to better capture civic engagement and mutual aid, while also recognizing the importance of contextual variations in how volunteering is understood.

For the purposes of the global estimates, this chapter considers the statistical definition of volunteer work from the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), which is narrower than the United Nations General Assembly definition (see Box 3.1 for further details on the definition of volunteer work). Under the ICLS definition, "people in volunteer

Box 3.1. What is volunteer work?

Volunteer work is only one type of volunteering as defined in Resolution A/RES/56/38 in 2001. It is different from other forms of volunteering such as civic participation in that it refers only to activities which are recognized as work or productive activities. Such activities, performed either in real life or online, result in goods being produced or services being provided.

Human activities that are inherently personal (i.e. which cannot be assigned to others) are considered to be outside the scope of work and are, therefore, not classified as volunteer work. Examples of voluntary non-work activities include protesting, boycotting, going on strike and donating blood.

Yet, such activities can be classified as volunteering if "undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor", as stated in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution.

work are defined as people of working age who, during a short reference period, performed any unpaid, non-compulsory activity to produce goods or provide services for others."[77] The estimates contained in this chapter are limited to this definition, which is important for statistical purposes, and do not cover engagement in any other forms of volunteering.

The global estimates presented in this chapter refer only to engagement in volunteer work and do not cover engagement in any other forms of volunteering. The chapter quantifies volunteer rates – defined as the share of the working-age population (15 years or older) who have performed any kind of volunteer work within a given period – at the global and regional levels.

Additionally, as volunteer work encompasses both activities performed through organizations (organization-based volunteering) and actions performed by individuals outside them (direct volunteering) – see Box 3.2. – this chapter will provide estimates of the prevalence of each of these two types of volunteer work, to shed light on how local contexts can shape the nature of volunteer work across the globe.

Box 3.2. Organization-based and direct volunteer work

Organization-based volunteer work is volunteer work provided through or for a formal or informal organization, which can be a non-profit organization, a private company, a public institution, community, mutual aid group. In contrast, direct volunteer work is volunteer work which is performed directly for other people, such as helping a neighbour or a friend without being managed by organization. The distinction between these two forms of volunteer work is crucial to analyse participation trends and to design policies that support volunteerism in all its forms.

The remainder of this chapter describes the available data on volunteer work and the methodological approach to estimate global and regional volunteering rates. It further presents the latest estimates of the share and number of working-age individuals who volunteer around the world and across different regions. While this chapter establishes the scale of volunteer work, following sections will delve into the underlying dynamics that are not always captured by statistical measures. Subsequent chapters of this Report will focus on volunteer measurement in context, addressing its multiple forms, contributions and impacts, and the roles of volunteering in a world facing growing complexity and interconnected crises.

3.2. Available data on volunteer work

Reliable global estimates of volunteer work are challenging to produce for three main reasons:

a) Data scarcity and sporadic measurement

Globally, less than a third of all countries (64 out of 193 United Nations Member States) have measured volunteer work through national statistics since 2008 (See Figure 3.1). These countries are predominantly high-income countries. Even for those that do undertake measurement, this is sporadic, with an average of only two recordings per country between 2008 and 2023. To address this significant gap, particularly in the Global South, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) conducted two ad hoc surveys on volunteer work in 2021 and 2025.[78]

Figure 3.1. Map / list of countries that have undertaken national statistical volunteer work measurements

Country					
Aruba	Cyprus	Guatemala	Lithuania	New Zealand	Slovenia
Armenia	Czechia	Croatia	Luxembourg	Peru	South Africa
Australia	Germany	Hungary	Latvia	Poland	Spain
Austria	Denmark	Indonesia	Republic of Moldova	Portugal	Sweden
Belgium	Estonia	Ireland	Mexico	Romania	Switzerland
Bangladesh	Finland	Iceland	North Macedonia	Russian Federation	Tajikistan
Bulgaria	Falkland Islands, Malvinas	Israel	Malta	Saudi Arabia	Ukraine
Brazil	France	Italy	Mongolia	Singapore	United States of America
Canada	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Japan	Netherlands	Sierra Leone	
Colombia	Greece	Kazakhstan	Norway	Serbia	
Cabo Verde		Kenya	Nepal	Slovakia	
Costa Rica		Republic of Korea			

b) Incomplete data collection

Most national surveys that measure volunteering focus only on organization-based volunteer work and neglect direct volunteer work, such as helping neighbours. Out of the 64 countries with available data, only 40 have information on total volunteer activities. This omission is likely to lead to an underestimation of the true scale of volunteering. The UNV-led 2025 survey, which applied a more comprehensive approach based on ILO guidance, captured volunteer work in all its forms based on the ICLS definition, resulting in significantly higher estimates of volunteering compared to many national surveys.

c) Lack of data comparability

Different definitions and measurement practices across countries create significant comparability challenges. One key issue is the varied reference periods used to measure volunteer engagement. While the 19th ICLS definition uses a four-week reference period, only about 20 per cent of national surveys adhere to this standard. The remaining data uses a one-year or one-week time-horizon, which requires a complex harmonization process to ensure that the data can be compared effectively.

Every small step we take here in Beijing is connected to bigger change happening somewhere else in the world.
Jialin Zhang, UN Volunteer Project Analyst with UNOSSC in China

3.3. Estimating volunteer rates

In order to render measurements of global and regional monthly volunteer rates comparable, this Report followed four main steps:[79]

Step 1: Data harmonization

All available data on volunteer work were standardized to a common four-week reference period, in line with the 19th ICLS definition. This involved simple adjustment factors to convert all data to four-week equivalents, making them comparable over the same period of time.

Step 2: Data validation and filtering

The available data were reviewed to discard any points which were deemed unreliable or inconsistent with international definitions. Data were excluded if they showed internal inconsistencies (e.g. if direct volunteering rates were higher than total rates) or sharp discontinuities due to changes in survey methods. In such cases, the most recent data were retained, as they typically reflect better measurement practices.

Step 3: Filling data gaps with modelling

A modelling approach was used to fill data gaps for specific types of volunteer work. If a survey provided data on direct or organization-based volunteering but not on total volunteering, or vice versa, the missing figures were estimated using the available information from the same country-year survey.

Step 4: Producing country-level and aggregate estimates

Country-level volunteer rates by gender were produced using a modelling approach similar to the ILO methodology for labour-market indicators.[80] This model establishes statistical relationships between observed volunteer rates and country-specific characteristics such as economic development and social capital.[81] It uses these relationships to impute missing observations for countries without data. When no information is available, the model uses regional averages from countries with at least some data as a benchmark.

Finally, these country-level estimates were aggregated to obtain regional and global figures. These estimates were population-weighted, based on the 2024 Revision of the United Nations World Population Prospects. To mitigate concerns about data sparsity and to smooth out annual fluctuations, the final regional and global estimates presented in this chapter are calculated as an average over the 2022–2025 period.[82]

3.4. Limitations

The modelled estimates should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations affecting their precision and comparability.

Inconsistent reference periods

One key concern is the lack of consistent reference periods in country-level exercises to measure volunteer work. While the harmonization process helps, it relies on strong assumptions of sample representativeness that may not fully hold true. This issue highlights the need for global alignment with the four-week reference period of the 19th ICLS standard to ensure data can be completed.

Missing data on types of voluntary work

Another challenge is that not all countries collect data on direct voluntary work, which often results in a lack of information on total volunteer rates. This poses a significant problem, as total volunteer work cannot always be precisely predicted from data on organization-based volunteering alone.

Although recent volunteer surveys conducted by the UNV and other partners have introduced advanced measurement tools, these improvements inevitably generate breaks in time series. The adoption of refined methodologies, such as asking specific questions about different forms of volunteer work, enables more nuanced data collection and may result in different volunteer rates being estimated compared to previous surveys, applying more general measurement approaches (see also chapter 2). Furthermore, the absence of consistent, repeated measurements in many countries hinders the assessment of trends over time, presenting a trade-off between achieving greater accuracy in individual data snapshots and the capacity to monitor long-term developments. It is essential to invest in survey tools that track informal and direct volunteering. This is crucial in the Global South, where such activities play a key role in community life.

3.5. New estimates of global and regional volunteer rates

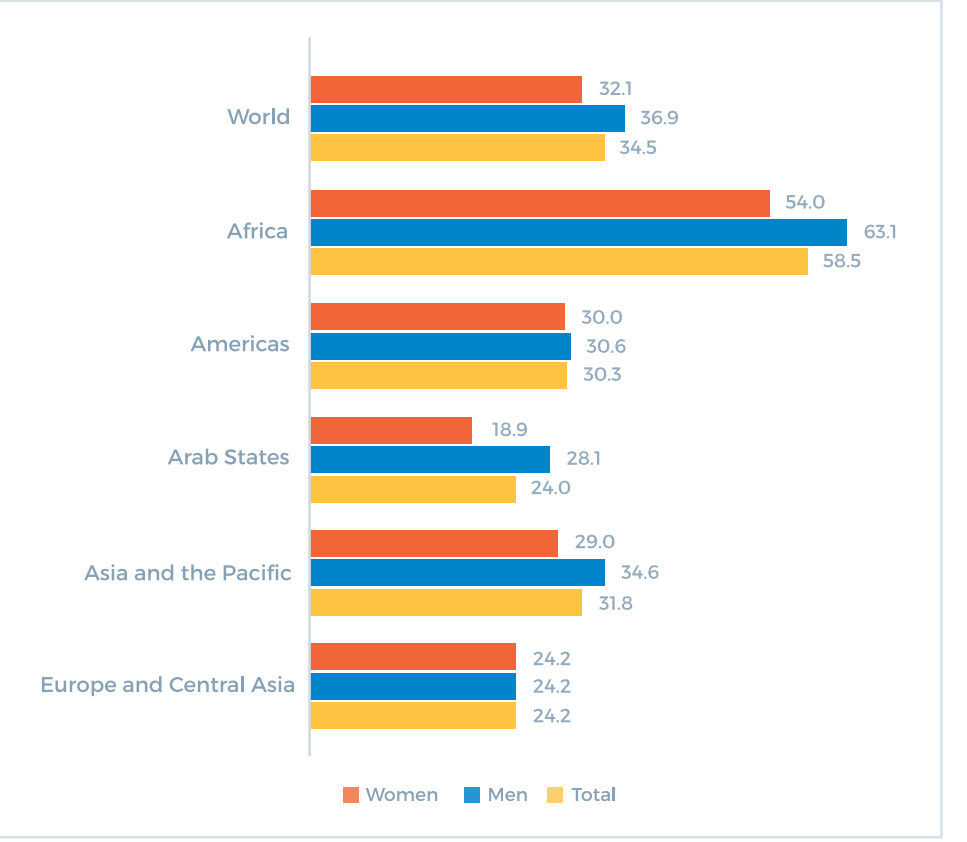
Globally, the monthly volunteer rate is 34.5 per cent, with men (36.9 per cent) volunteering to a slightly greater extent than women (32.1 per cent).[83] The following analysis breaks down this figure by region, highlighting significant variations in volunteer engagement across the world (See Figure 3.2). However, it is important to acknowledge that there are gendered patterns to the distribution of care work and volunteer work, particularly in lower-income countries as wider studies have shown.[84]

Overall, about one in three people worldwide volunteers within a four-week period, though regional patterns and gender disparities vary significantly. Africa stands out with the highest participation levels. The high volunteer rate estimates for Africa are also partly attributable to the comprehensive measurement approach used in the 2021 and 2025 UNV surveys, which is aligned with ILO guidance, and captures a broader range of volunteer work.

Looking at differences in estimated volunteer work rates across regions, Africa records the highest levels of participation in volunteer work, with 58.5 per cent of its working-age population engaging in this activity, including 54 per cent of women and 63.1 per cent of men. This highlights the strong role of volunteer work in social and community life across the continent. In contrast, the Americas show a rate of 30.3 per cent, with very little difference between women (30 per cent) and men (30.6 per cent).

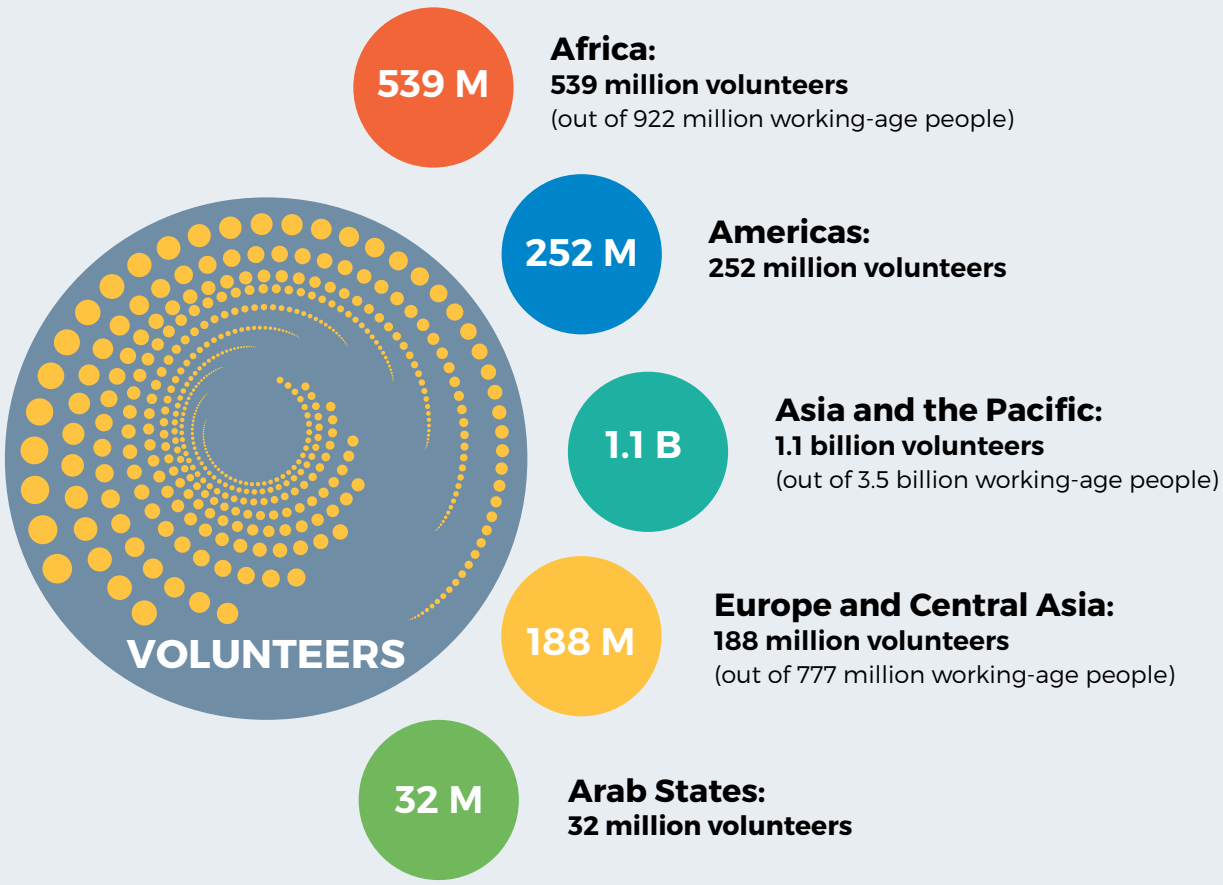
In the Arab States, the volunteer rate is comparatively low at 24 per cent. Here, gender differences are more pronounced, with 28.1 per cent of working-age men participating at a higher rate than women at 18.9 per cent. A similar pattern is observed in Asia and the Pacific, which has a volunteer rate of 31.8 per cent, but men are more likely (34.6 per cent) to engage in volunteer work than women (29.0 per cent). These disparities are likely to stem from various factors, including sociocultural norms and institutional barriers that often limit women's opportunities to engage in public life. Europe and Central Asia report a similar volunteer rate of 24.2 per cent. Although Europe shows no overall gender difference, it is worth noting that within Central Asia women constitute more than 75 per cent of all volunteers.

Figure 3.2. Total volunteer rates by region and gender (%)



Note: Volunteer rates are expressed as the share of the working-age population in a given region that is estimated to engage in volunteer work in any given four-week period of the year, according to the definition explained earlier in this chapter.
Source: ILO calculations based on ILOSTAT, 2021 UNV-Gallup survey, 2025 UNV survey.

Figure 3.3. Monthly number of volunteers by region



These figures demonstrate the vast number of people regularly engaged in this activity and underscore the immense contribution that volunteering makes to societies and economies.

The sheer scale of global volunteer work is evident when percentages are translated into absolute numbers. With a worldwide working-age population of 6.1 billion, the volunteer rate of 34.5 per cent means approximately 2.1 billion individuals volunteer each month. Of these people, about 1.1 billion are men.

3.6. Current and previous estimates of volunteer rates

These new global and regional estimates of volunteer rates are significantly higher than the 14.9 per cent global rate published in the 2022 SWVR.[85] However, these figures cannot be directly compared. Despite appearances, this difference does not indicate a "volunteering boom" but is instead due to a change in methodology. This confirms one of the key messages of this Report, that it is important to be clear about how and why volunteering is being measured to ensure data is not mispresented or misused (see chapter 1).

The primary reason for this apparently significant shift is the inclusion of the new data from the 2025 UNV survey. This survey used a more sophisticated measurement approach and was specifically designed to fill critical data gaps in the Global South with large populations. Because the new estimates rely on population-weighted averages from these key countries, the results strongly influenced the overall figures, leading to a substantial increase in the estimated global rate. These results also heavily influence the regional averages used to estimate rates for other countries. This is particularly true for some of the regions, for example, Africa, where prior data was severely limited.

The new, higher global volunteer rates therefore reflect a change in measurement, not necessarily a real-world increase in volunteering over time. While volunteer work may have grown since 2022, this cannot be established with certainty from the available data.

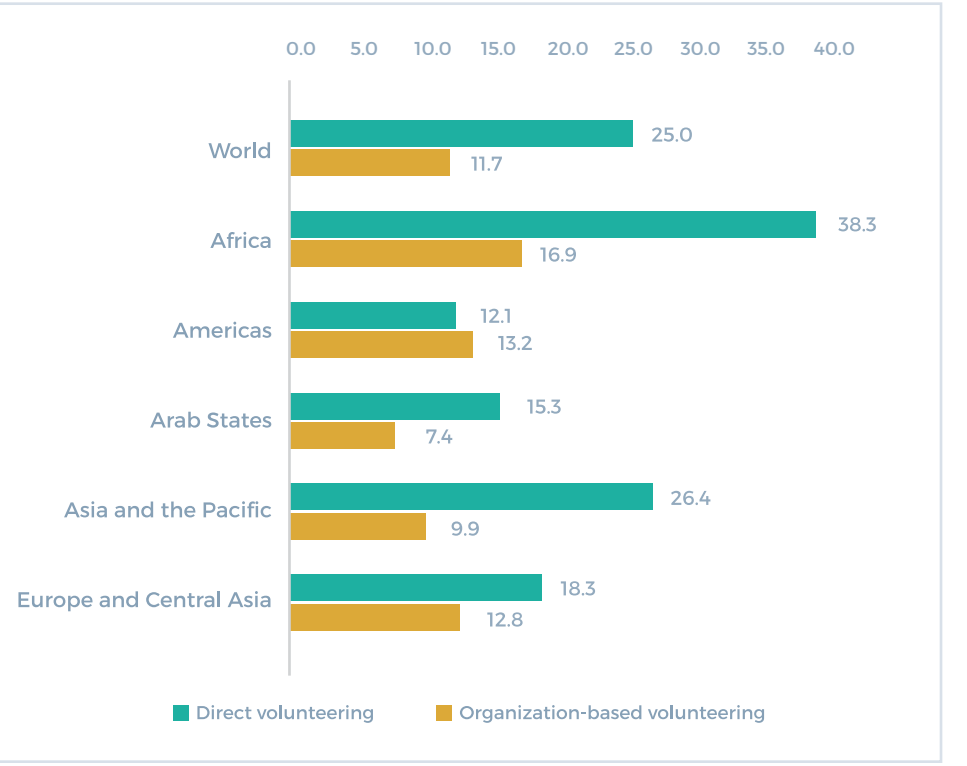
3.7. Estimates of volunteer rates by type of volunteer work

Estimates of volunteer rates show clear differences in the prevalence of organization-based versus direct volunteering (see Figure 3.4). Globally, direct volunteer work is more than twice as common as organization-based volunteering, with a quarter of the working-age population participating in direct volunteering compared to 11.7 per cent in organization-based volunteering. This figure is largely driven by the prevalence of direct volunteering in the Global South, where community-based mutual aid is often the foundational layer of the social fabric (see also chapters 4 and 5). This 2:1 ratio of direct to organization-based volunteering is a powerful indicator that, for most of the world's population, resilience and social capital are built horizontally, through peer-to-peer networks, rather than vertically, through formal or informal institutions. This has potentially massive implications for development partners, who overwhelmingly channel resources and capacity-building efforts through registered, formal organizations and by doing so may be overlooking vibrant and trusted forms of civic action in many communities.

This pattern varies significantly by region. For example, Africa stands out with the highest rates for both forms of volunteering, with 38.3 per cent for direct and 16.9 per cent for organization-based volunteering. In contrast, the pattern is less contrasting in the Americas, with organization-based volunteer work (13.2 per cent) only slightly exceeding that of direct volunteer work (12.1 per cent). This is likely to stem from the well-established non-profit sector in North America, which influences the regional average.

Consistent with its overall volunteer rate, the Arab States have the lowest rates for both direct volunteering (15.3 per cent) and organization-based volunteering (7.4 per cent). Meanwhile, Asia and the Pacific report that 26.4 per cent of people participate in direct volunteer work and 9.9 per cent take part in organization-based volunteering, while Europe and Central Asia show relatively even levels of participation, with 18.3 per cent and 12.6 per cent for direct and organization-based volunteer activities, respectively.

Figure 3.4. Direct and organization-based volunteering rates by region (%)



Note: Volunteer rates are expressed as the share of the working-age population in a given region that is estimated to engage in volunteer work in any given four-week period of the year.
Source: ILO calculations based on ILOSTAT, 2021 UNV-Gallup survey, 2025 UNV survey.

These key take-away from these figures is that while informal volunteering is the dominant form of volunteering around the world, the balance between the two types varies significantly across regions.

Anja Menninger, UN Volunteer with UN Women, supports women's leadership in Rohingya camps and host communities in Bangladesh. Funded by the Government of Switzerland.
Credit: UNV 2024

3.8. Conclusion: A strategic road map for action

The findings presented in this chapter contribute towards a better understanding of rates of volunteer work around the world. The key estimate – **that 2.1 billion people, or approximately one in three working-age adults worldwide, engage in volunteer work each month** – is significant. It shows the power of human solidarity worldwide. A global workforce focused on the social good represents a renewable resource for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

However, while volunteerism is beneficial, it rarely gets attention in economic or social policy discussions. The following chapters in this Report address this oversight, stating the importance of measuring the contribution volunteering can make to individual health, well-being, skills and employability, as well as to development outcomes, particularly in health and education.

These impacts and the scale of participation call for changes in both global and national strategies. It is essential to move towards the formal recognition of volunteering and to prioritize its systematic integration into national development plans, economic records and social policy frameworks. Current data indicate that individuals are contributing their time, skills and energy on an unprecedented scale. To fully harness this potential, volunteer contributions need to be part of national accounts and labour statistics. The systematic measurement and reporting of volunteer work at national level and capturing direct volunteering avoids underestimation and points to volunteerism as a vital force for sustainable development. Moreover, volunteer work statistics can provide valuable feedback to policymakers on the areas where public services, healthcare and community development interventions need adjustments. Understanding volunteering rates can help governments allocate resources efficiently and direct funds and support to areas where volunteering is most impactful.

Sustaining the production of reliable global estimates over time will require countries to continue measuring engagement in volunteer work regularly and in line with international statistical standards. In particular, aligning national surveys and statistical systems with the 19th ICLS definition of volunteer work is critical to ensuring accuracy, comparability and coherence across contexts. Strengthening measurement in this way will not only improve the quality of volunteer data and related estimates but also help to ensure that the vital contributions that volunteers make to societies and economies are fully recognized and effectively incorporated into evidence-based policymaking.

By adopting this road map, the global community can establish a new framework with its citizens that acknowledges their roles, provides support for their initiatives and collaborates to create a more equitable, sustainable and resilient future.

Selamawit Lake Fanta (left), UN Volunteer International Midwifery Educator with UNICEF, demonstrates a pregnancy examination to midwifery trainees in India. *Credit: UNV 2024*

4

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING ON INDIVIDUAL HEALTH, WELL-BEING, SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Key messages

- **Volunteering can create both benefits and risks** for individual health, well-being, skills and employability. Positive impacts on confidence, resilience and skills can exist alongside the risks of stress, exclusion and unequal access.
- **Conventional approaches to measurement can fail to capture the full range of local meanings and lived experiences of volunteering.** It is essential to expand measurement to include adaptive, context-sensitive and inclusive approaches that take the Global South into account.
- **Mixed methods and combining different types of data can strengthen measurement** by coupling the scale of quantitative data to the depth of qualitative insights. This can capture both broad patterns and the impact of individual experiences of volunteering on health and employability to deepen measurement insight and learning.
- **Stronger and more inclusive data on the impact of individual volunteering** can support organizations and governments to create fairer volunteer pathways, ensuring that more people can access the benefits of volunteering.

4.1. Introduction

For individuals, volunteering can boost confidence, resilience and skills, but it can also involve stress, exclusion and unequal experiences. Capturing this full spectrum of outcomes requires measurement approaches that are sensitive to cultural contexts and inclusive of diverse individual experiences.[86]

This chapter explores quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to measuring the multiple effects of volunteering on individuals. To date, most evidence on personal impacts draws from experiences of individuals in or from the Global North, including local and international volunteers.[87] Expanding the discussion about how to measure volunteering particularly in settings in the Global South can lead to data that offers a more representative account of volunteering worldwide. This stronger evidence can help inform future advocacy, guide the fair distribution of resources and address inequalities in who volunteers and how they benefit from it.

4.2. Measuring volunteer contributions to individual health and well-being

Health should be understood as complete physical, mental and social well-being, not just the absence of disease.[88] For volunteers, this well-being is influenced by the act of volunteering itself. Measuring the impact of volunteering on individual health therefore involves assessing how it affects these aspects of a volunteer's well-being.

Some accounts have shown that volunteering can indeed contribute towards greater individual well-being. Community health volunteer systems in Kenya, for example, have been shown to strengthen volunteers' emotional resilience and sense of purpose.[89] Similar patterns have been reported in Indonesia, where health outreach volunteers have spoken about increased confidence through peer networks.[90]

The benefits of volunteering to individuals, such as increased confidence, reduced loneliness, improved quality of life and even, in some studies, lower mortality rates[91] may and should be celebrated. However, there is another side to the coin. High-stress roles, such as participating in a humanitarian response, can also lead to burnout and psychological distress.[92] Marginalized groups may face additional risks. For example, in India, volunteer community health workers from disadvantaged backgrounds reported experiencing discrimination that undermined their well-being,[93] while in the UK, volunteers with disabilities were more likely than those without disabilities to report negative health impacts.[94]

Context-sensitive measurement is essential to understand the full impact of volunteering. The majority of current research on health and well-being comes from the Global North, which risks overlooking the unique experiences of volunteers elsewhere. Furthermore, the link between volunteering, health and well-being can appear too simplistic if it fails to

A 2018 programme by UNDP, UNHCR, and UNV in Serbia placed young Roma people in local institutions to assist them in influencing social and political processes. *Credit: UNV 2024*

account for key factors such as a volunteer's motivation, the type of role they perform and the social dynamics at play.[95] Combining standard health data with volunteers' personal accounts can provide a more complete picture, revealing crucial impacts on things such as confidence, stress and sense of purpose that single metrics often overlook.

4.2.1. Measuring and mapping health and well-being

Key approaches and methods

The impact of volunteering on individual health and well-being can be assessed through a variety of methodological approaches and tools, reflecting the diversity of volunteering contexts. Quantitative approaches have historically dominated this field, as policymakers, funders and health systems tend to prioritize standardized, comparable data for planning and resource allocation (see also chapter 2). Structured indices such as the World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5),[96] the Short Form-36 Health Survey[97] and self-reported health datasets[98] capture core dimensions including physical health, mental health, functional capacity and life satisfaction. However, these tools may inadvertently neglect other aspects of well-being, such as a feeling of belonging and personal agency, that are particularly relevant to volunteers.[99]

Large-scale national studies, particularly in the Global North, often rely on data collected at a single point in time to investigate associations between volunteering and well-being, considering variables such as age, income, gender and employment status.[100] While these surveys are valuable for identifying population trends, they typically focus on personal motivations and individual achievements, potentially overlooking cultural understandings of health and well-being such as family harmony, spiritual balance and belonging to a community. As a result, they may overlook the key drivers of why volunteering matters, particularly in lower-income settings. For example, in Uganda, village health teams reported that volunteering strengthened personal resilience and social support networks, even in resource-scarce environments.[101]

Because numbers alone cannot capture the full subjective experience of volunteers, qualitative and participatory methods can provide further evidence on the impact of volunteering to health and well-being in context-specific ways. Approaches such as in-depth interviews, life histories, ethnographic observation and community scorecards reveal links between volunteer experiences and health-related outcomes such as emotional resilience, stress levels, social belonging and confidence in performing their roles. These methods help to better understand and measure personal volunteer experiences. There can, however, be cost and feasibility challenges associated with in-depth qualitative research. These factors are particularly significant when working with marginalized populations, where issues such as trust, language and cultural practices play a more decisive role in how people experience and report their well-being. Participatory approaches and volunteer reflective journals can help volunteers express their experiences in their own words and according to their own priorities. A critical analysis of this type of qualitative data can ensure that measurement reflects not only predefined outcomes but also what volunteers themselves consider most meaningful for their health and well-being.[102] In Laos, for example, by combining structured well-being

scales with participatory mapping, grassroots organizations were able to measure how young people experienced emotional resilience and a sense of belonging as a result of their volunteering (see Case Study Box 4.1).

Key issues: measurement challenges

The current evidence on the impact of volunteering on health and well-being is largely informed by data from the Global North which, while highly valuable, tends to emphasize outcomes from formal volunteering structures rather than from communal or informal volunteering.[104] As a result, many of the indicators commonly used to assess well-being are grounded in more individualistic conceptions, such as personal achievement or income security, and may overlook the collective and relational dimensions that can be more prominent in other contexts, including those in the Global South.[105]

Several barriers to measuring how volunteering helps individual health and well-being can be identified. Inaccessible terminology can exclude volunteers who are not familiar with technical health-related terms. Low literacy levels can make it hard for some people to complete written surveys. Stigma around mental health can stop some volunteers from honestly reporting stress or emotional strain. In some cases, volunteers may also hesitate to report negative experiences, such as exhaustion, stress or frustration, for fear of losing their volunteering role, damaging their relationship with the organization or facing judgment from peers.[106] Conventional approaches to measurement often fail to capture these less reported but significant risks, including the psychosocial impact and potential trauma caused by volunteering during crises and emergencies. In Iraq, for example, volunteer mental health workers in displacement camps reported high levels of emotional fatigue alongside pride in the contribution they were making, yet these impacts were absent from official programme evaluations.[107] Such examples point to a broader gap in existing studies, which frequently overlook the co-existence of seemingly contradictory experiences for volunteers (e.g. strain and fulfilment, vulnerability and resilience). This under-reporting is particularly concerning in contexts affected by conflicts, disasters or chronic resource shortages, where professional support services are scarce and the demands on volunteers are high.

Box 4.1. From personal leadership to community transformation: grassroots measurement by youth volunteers in Laos[103]

Measuring volunteering is often seen as costly, with many assuming it requires substantial financial resources and technical expertise beyond the reach of small projects or grassroots initiatives. However, insights from the Association for Promoting Learning and Skills Development for Youth in Community (APLSY) in Laos show that effective measurement can be achieved with limited resources. Through the APLYS Don't Stop Dream Team unit, local youth volunteers used both quantitative and qualitative strategies to capture the value of volunteering in Vientiane, the capital and largest city of Laos.

While online and offline forms tracked volunteer hours and participation rates, these numbers alone offered only a partial understanding of the youth programme outcomes. The team combined these methods of measurement with interviews, feedback surveys and pre- and post-programme assessments. The mixed-method approach revealed not only the scale of engagement but also the depth of change experienced by volunteers and the young people they supported. Measurement patterns showed that volunteers improved their well-being and confidence and developed their leadership abilities and soft skills over time.

This enabled the organization to identify the most effective elements of the programme and to refine training materials and methodologies. Through targeted assessments and interviews, the initiative also identified specific aspects of its soft skills training that most effectively contributed to the volunteers' personal growth.

In many cases, it is unclear whether volunteering improves health or whether healthier people are simply more likely to volunteer.[108] This makes the evidence harder to interpret, but using a combination of tools can provide clearer insights to address this. For example, a Theory of Change approach sets out assumptions about how volunteering is expected to improve health and well-being and then tests whether these assumptions hold true.[109] Contribution Analysis recognizes that many factors beyond volunteering may lead to observed changes,

hence it can help identify the specific role volunteering played within a bigger programming picture.[110] Outcome Harvesting works in reverse: it first identifies changes in a determined scope, and then traces them back to volunteer contributions. It does not require indicators or logical models. After the 'harvest', cross-analysis with various types of variables can be performed to understand trends of change.[111] For example, it first identifies changes to health that have taken place and then looks back to see whether, and how, volunteering contributed to them. These methods emphasize context and help determine not only whether volunteering improves individual's health, but if so under what conditions.

Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition that psychosocial factors (e.g. agency, inclusion, dignity and hope) should be incorporated into measurement frameworks in order to more accurately assess the health and well-being impacts of volunteering on individuals.[112] These aspects are often key to how volunteers define their own well-being, yet are frequently missing from standard metrics. Measuring them can be resource-intensive and, in some contexts, politically sensitive if findings reveal negative impacts. As a result, their inclusion in evaluation frameworks remains inconsistent. Improving efforts to capture these dimensions, within existing capacities, can reduce the risk of overlooking key psychosocial outcomes for volunteers, while also creating an opportunity to build a fuller, more credible case for the value of volunteering and its contributions to individual well-being.

Geography matters: context and place

The setting in which volunteering takes place influences what aspects of health and well-being are measured, how information is gathered and the way findings are interpreted and valued. Standardized tools make it possible to conduct comparisons across countries but can obscure the local meanings and lived experiences that make volunteering personally significant (see also chapter 2). Approaches to measuring the health and well-being of volunteers that adapt to local contexts provide stronger evidence and also consider the impact of social and political environments on such outcomes.

UN Volunteer Filippo Busconi speaks to former fistula patient Madjibeye Felicité in N›Djamena, Chad. *Credit: UNV 2009*

For example, a mixed-methods study carried out on international migrants in Japan[113] found that volunteering did not automatically lead to better well-being, contrasting with evidence from elsewhere. This highlights the need to consider context and individual experiences when assessing its impacts.

In Kenya, community health volunteers described experiencing strong motivation and pride in their roles, but also emotional strain from working in underserved areas without consistent support or remuneration.[114] Although vital to the health system, their contributions rarely appear in official statistics and their well-being is not routinely monitored. Practical barriers such as lack of transport and inadequate supplies also influence both the physical and mental health of volunteers.[115] When these operational constraints are not captured in data, there is a risk that negative impacts are attributed solely to volunteering itself rather than to the wider environmental conditions.[116]

> *I've come to see volunteering as a form of peacebuilding. Peace isn't always about high-level diplomacy—it also begins with everyday connections, mutual respect, and shared goals across borders.*
>
> Eldana Karimova, Youth Team at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Thailand

In Spain, the 'Youth, Volunteering and Well-being' initiative explored how youth volunteering can act as a tool for promoting emotional and social well-being by combining standardized mental health indicators, such as life satisfaction, loneliness, and depressive symptoms, with data on the frequency, duration, and type of volunteer participation.[117] The results show that young people who experience greater levels of autonomy, competence, and interpersonal connection through volunteering are also more likely to maintain long-term commitment. This correlation between well-being and continued participation reinforces the approach to volunteering as a strategic intervention for mental health and personal development and guides public policies toward models that integrate volunteering into educational and civic engagement programmes.

Other examples demonstrate the value of culturally grounded and community-driven tools. In Indonesia, village health initiatives used group dialogues to track emotional outcomes among volunteers and individuals benefiting from their support, turning evaluation into a trust-building exercise.[118] In Tanzania, mental well-being indicators were added to routine health outreach reports, making volunteer well-being more visible in existing health data systems.[119] These examples show how integrating volunteer well-being into existing data systems can make measurement more sustainable, although questions remain about privacy, depth of insight and the risk that such tools may reduce the volunteer experience to narrow indicators and neglect other important impacts.

Whether through adapting existing tools, embedding evaluation in trusted community processes or harnessing technology for regular feedback, the goal of measurement should be to produce evidence that captures the multiple effects of volunteering on volunteers' health and well-being in ways that are credible to decision makers and meaningful to volunteers themselves.

4.2.2. Tools and mixed methods for measuring individual health and well-being

Measuring the impact of volunteering on individual health and well-being is strongest when multiple tools are used in combination. Quantitative measures (e.g. standardized health scales) provide tracking patterns and enable comparison of results across groups, while qualitative approaches (e.g. interviews, focus groups and narrative techniques) help to reveal the complexity of changes experienced by volunteers and how they can be assessed (see also chapter 5).

Volunteer voices

Participatory qualitative approaches allow volunteers to define and track their own indicators of health and well-being. For example, in Iran, a participatory action research project with health volunteers used reflective journals, in-depth interviews and group sessions to capture how volunteers experienced the clarification of their roles, skill development and emotional change, showing measurable improvements in knowledge, competence and satisfaction alongside enhanced confidence and motivation to continue in their roles.[120] The process also encouraged ongoing dialogue among volunteers, making measurement itself part of their support system.

Accuracy and comparability

Standardized quantitative health and well-being scales (e.g. WHO-5 and SF-36) remain important for building comparable datasets across contexts. When adapted to local languages and cultural references, they can provide robust benchmarks without losing relevance. In the Global Volunteering Study conducted by the Coordinating Committee

National UN Community Volunteer Felly Kalonji Kambala is one of the UNICEF Young Champions in the Democratic Republic of Congo. *Credit: UNV 2023*

for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS), pre- and post-engagement surveys were conducted to gather evidence from volunteers worldwide and then combined with qualitative interviews (see Case Study Box 4.3.).[121] On the one hand, the survey design included established scales to assess the volunteers' perceived well-being and specific elements addressing the acquisition of competencies and volunteer learning. On the other, in-depth qualitative interviews explored themes such as community participation and intercultural relations, offering insights into how international volunteering experiences shape volunteers' well-being and confidence.[122] This allowed the research to retain cross-country comparability while respecting local interpretations of well-being.

Links between health and engagement data

Some programmes integrate health and well-being indicators into existing volunteer management systems, linking outcomes to patterns of engagement. In Scotland, the national centre for volunteering, Volunteer Scotland, collaborated with State of Life, a company specializing in measuring social impact and value, to link national survey data on volunteering frequency, with measures of mental well-being. This made it possible to quantify the social value of volunteering at individual and population levels. The analysis showed particularly strong well-being benefits for people with disabilities or long-term health conditions, as well as consistent positive effects for people who volunteered on a weekly basis.[123]

The value of triangulation

Triangulation involves combining different types of data and perspectives to understand a situation and is a way of cross-checking results to strengthen both credibility and insight. In volunteer measurement, this might mean pairing quantitative data such as survey scores and participation counts with qualitative data such as interviews, personal stories and observation notes. This combination allows practitioners not only to validate findings but also to capture changes in health and well-being that a single method might miss. When applied well, triangulation can reveal both the scale and the depth of volunteer impact. Importantly, it can also uncover why certain patterns occur, helping organizations refine strategies and address unexpected challenges in relation to volunteers' health and well-being. The example from Laos illustrates that mixed methods are not the preserve of large, well-funded programmes. With creativity and local ownership, grassroots groups can generate credible, actionable evidence using a combination of measurement approaches (see Case Study Box 4.1). Combining the rigour of quantitative tools with the richness of qualitative insights can help deepen understanding, support organizational learning and ensure that measurement captures not just the health and well-being outcomes for volunteers, but the human experiences that underpin them.

4.3. Measuring the contribution of volunteering to individual skills and employability

Skills development can be defined as "the development of skills or competencies which are relevant to the workforce,"[124] and employability as the "portable competencies and qualifications that enhance an individual's capacity to make use of the education and training opportunities available

in order to secure and retain decent work, to progress within the enterprise and between jobs, and to cope with changing technology and labour-market conditions".[125] Volunteering can contribute in different ways to an individual volunteer's qualities or attributes, for example through the development of new skills, leadership qualities and self-esteem.[126] This focus has dominated the policy and academic landscape, with a particular emphasis on skills development for young people and pathways to employment.[127]

Different forms of volunteering present different potential pathways to improving individual skills and employability. To capture this, mixed-methods approaches can provide robust data for volunteers, communities, policymakers, researchers, organizations and the public and private sectors who promote, support or often rely on volunteering as a pathway to skills and employability.

4.3.1. Measuring and mapping skills and employability

Key approaches and methods

To date, the relationship between volunteering, individual skills and employability has predominantly been measured through quantification, with most existing studies focused on contexts in the Global North.[128] These studies often focus on measuring the percentage of individuals who go on to secure employment after volunteering and tracking the number of volunteers gaining formal certifications via programmes. Findings have generally reported a positive relationship between volunteering and employment,[129] which is useful for the volunteering sector to demonstrate its value for individual livelihoods. It is also helpful for making the case that volunteering should be part of wider government employment policies. However, these results can be complex with sometimes weak correlations or relationships. A wide range of indicators can be relevant for exploring the relationships between volunteering, skills and employability, such as volunteer role, the frequency and duration of volunteering, the volunteer's motivations and incentives, management, supervision and support, the demographic characteristics and social identities of volunteers and the educational or employment background of volunteers and/or their stage of working life. However, there is a risk of oversimplifying the link between volunteering and employment, which is not always linear.[130]

Measurable links between volunteering and employability can be evidenced quantitatively through access to large national datasets and surveys such as the US Current Population Survey[131] and the British Household Panel Survey.[132] This type of study uses cross-sectional or longitudinal data to assess employability outcomes, positioning volunteering as a pathway for unemployed people accessing work. This approach reveals important insights but also presents challenges. There is a lack of national datasets around the world, especially in the Global South and inconsistencies across national datasets. There can also be limited information available on influencing factors, which hampers claims to causal relationships. Wider research also demonstrates the importance of the socioeconomic context in which volunteering takes place, both for the meaning, value and social perception of volunteering itself and for understanding different levels of access to additional 'upskilling' or training opportunities. This matters for policy and practice when developing evidence-based solutions to unemployment and underemployment.

Similar to measuring other impacts on individuals (including on health and well-being, discussed earlier), a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods including self-reflection surveys, interviews, focus groups and diary methods can also reveal volunteers' own perceptions of how volunteering improves their skills and personal development. This can include an increase in human capital, social capital and active citizenship, as well as enhancing confidence and raising individual aspirations towards future employment.[133] These skills are more difficult to trace and measure, but feedback from individuals on their experiences provides important evidence on the transformational impacts of volunteering on individuals. Studies also point to the positive signals that volunteering can send to prospective employers, which can in turn increase people's self-perceived employability.[134]

Key issues: inequalities and different environments

Measurement tools rooted in the Global North and reliant solely on quantitative approaches can fail to account for barriers to participation and the uneven access to volunteer opportunities (see also chapter 5). Evidence reveals how some volunteers are unable to access opportunities to gain skills and employability, particularly in the context of displacement, due to inequalities.[135] This includes not being able to access roles or not

possessing knowledge on how to harness these skills and use them to improve labour-market participation. Measurement approaches that capture such inequalities can provide governments and other stakeholders with evidence to inform inclusive volunteering policies. By identifying barriers, organizations can also adapt their practices to create more inclusive volunteer experiences (see Case Study Box 4.2).

Measurement is also important for tackling the long-standing yet still urgent challenges for wider skills and employability interventions, especially for young people.[137] Current youth employment policies largely focus on the supply-side of the labour market (e.g. developing opportunities for young people to upskill), rather than the realities of the demand-side (e.g. seeking to create jobs for young workers) which are impacted by structural inequalities, global economic change and a lack of job opportunities.[138] Given these challenges, there are calls for greater multi-sector collaboration to provide volunteers with skills they can leverage towards tangible employability outcomes, such as accreditation and specific training.[139] Improvements to measurement strategies can not only support organizations' recruitment, retention and practices, but also provide evidence for governments on the broader economic disparities in the labour market facing volunteers.

Comparative studies across different regions indicate the importance of context-specific measurement, ensuring that data captures the relationships between volunteering and the specific characteristics of labour markets.

4.3.2. Tools and mixed methods for measuring individual skills and employability

Combining measurement tools and approaches in a complementary way can ensure that stronger evidence is gathered on the range of skills developed through volunteering.[140] There are, however, important studies that are exclusively qualitative or quantitative. For example, a study in the Philippines conducted by World Citi Colleges Quezon City demonstrated the value of focusing on individuals' lived experiences and impacts solely through qualitative research via reflection essays, rather than hours logged or other quantitative metrics.[141] The data collected from student

Box 4.2. Breaking barriers through measurement: Improving volunteer experiences in outdoor sports[136]

Volunteer measurement is not only about capturing the benefits of volunteering but also about identifying the obstacles that volunteers face and finding ways to overcome them. The global charity, parkrun, brings communities together through outdoor sports and social connection, engaging over 45,000 volunteers worldwide. Its strategy to measure and improve volunteer engagement centres on two tools, the Volunteer Experience Survey which is conducted every six months and the biennial Volunteer Barriers Survey, which is conducted every two years, launched in 2019 and 2022, respectively.

The Volunteer Experience Survey, distributed to a representative sample of volunteers, tracks the benefits and challenges of volunteering in the parkrun initiative. The 2024 addition of a Volunteer Net Promoter Score (VNPS) provides a clear metric to analyse satisfaction and advocacy. The Barriers Survey, on the other hand, explores reasons for non-participation or disengagement, highlighting issues such as competing interests among participants and difficulties with advance commitment. Measuring the contrasting indicators through both survey tools is a valuable way to generate actionable insights. For example, feedback about volunteers feeling disconnected from the organization's head office prompted the introduction of newsgroups, webinars and a volunteer feedback pool with a view to strengthening engagement and inclusion in decision-making. Findings from measuring the experiences of those who do not currently volunteer or those who were not retained after the COVID-19 pandemic also prompted the development of flexible engagement opportunities. This includes same-day participation and options that combine volunteering opportunities with sports activities, to meet diverse preferences and reduce barriers.

By combining regular feedback with a targeted analysis of barriers, therefore, organizations can use evidence-based measurement not only to understand individual volunteer experiences, but also to adjust activities and enhance accessibility, engagement and impact. In this way, measurement becomes a tool for organizational growth, volunteer support and stronger community development, rather than just a reporting exercise.

volunteers in community extension services led to an alternative service-learning model based on structured reflection.[142] In contrast, evidence from Germany illustrates the continued importance of exclusively quantitative surveys in certain contexts. The experiences of international volunteers on the weltwärts programme, involving 130 German civil society organizations in partnership with over 1,000 partners in the Global South, have been consistently measured over the past 10 years through an annual survey.[143] This has enabled a wider evaluation of participant satisfaction, both supporting programme management and tracking personal skills development.

Applying the mixed-methods approach discussed in the health and well-being section, this section demonstrates how quantitative and qualitative approaches can also offer different insights into skills and employability – one tracking patterns such as employment outcomes or training uptake, the other revealing how volunteers experience skills development and apply it in practice (see Case Study Box 4.3).

The dominant quantitative focus on tangible employment outcomes does, therefore, provide insight, but mixed-methods approaches can add nuance by revealing inequalities that might affect how volunteering translates into skills and employability, particularly in lower-income settings. Such evidence is vital for designing inclusive volunteering approaches that ensure these benefits are accessible to the widest range of people.

Employability

When employability is a key aim of organizations or volunteering initiatives, it is crucial to adopt measurement strategies that can combine both qualitative insights on personal development and quantitative measures such as job placements and business creation insights, involving different stakeholders. The experience of Achieve17 Youth Club, an informal community-based initiative in Bangladesh, shows how measurement can go beyond simply counting volunteer hours to capturing longer-term impacts, including employment creation and skills development. The social club's strategy blended quantitative data on jobs secured as a result of volunteering with qualitative narratives of empowerment and growth.[145] A mixed approach was also used to measure the impact of VSO's Empowering Teenage Girls to Learn and Earn (EAGLE) project in

Box 4.3. Measuring the value of short-term international volunteering programmes: A global perspective[144]

International volunteering is often celebrated for fostering cultural exchange and developing skills, but its impact – on both volunteers and society – is often not systematically measured. The Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS) adopted a robust mixed-methods approach to assess the impact of volunteering around the world.

A pre- and post-test survey of over 800 volunteers from 91 countries measured 11 skills areas including intercultural communication, leadership, citizenship and knowledge of the SDGs. The results revealed that 78 per cent of volunteers reported significant gains in global awareness, providing strong evidence of the educational value of short-term volunteering. The data-driven insights went on to inform programme design and helped organizations to refine volunteer training for skills development.

In addition to the survey, over 150 semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in 31 countries. These engaged local associations, public institutions and community members to explore participation, intercultural relations and project continuity. The findings showed that most community members viewed volunteer efforts as catalysts for sustained local initiatives, such as environmental projects, helping organizations align activities with community needs and enhance project relevance and sustainability. The data revealed some universal patterns, such as consistent skills and competency gains, as well as context-specific insights.

NGOs and community members co-developed the assessment framework by defining priorities and using participatory tools for measurement. This ensured locally driven outcomes and increased project ownership. For instance, the community-defined indicators for intercultural engagement improved programme alignment, thereby directly impacting local buy-in. Academic partners supported the quasi-experimental survey design and the application of peacebuilding tools, enhancing methodological rigour and credibility. This academic input validated the findings, making them persuasive for policy audiences and enabling a strong evidence base to advocate for the value of international volunteering.

Mozambique, combining an assessment of volunteer-driven digital literacy training with tracking life skills and entrepreneurship among out-of-school young girls. The project's measurement strategy engages multiple interest groups, including civil society organizations, the private sector, volunteer-involving organizations, government institutions, academic institutions and volunteers themselves.[146]

Livelihoods

Research on volunteering among young refugees in Uganda revealed the particular effects of COVID-19 on their livelihoods. As offers from international organizations and volunteering opportunities declined, so did the means for these young people to sustain themselves.[147] To capture this complexity, a mixed-methods approach combined a large in-person survey of 3,053 young refugees with a participatory photovoice project involving 20 young refugees. Photovoice invites participants to capture their lived experiences through photography and narrative discussion, storytelling or interviews. This combined methodology demonstrated its value by providing a comprehensive understanding of the volume and patterns of voluntary action for a specific population group, and its impacts on individual lives and overall livelihoods.[148]

Digital platforms

Growing digital engagement and social media platforms offer the potential to measure volunteering in diverse contexts. In Russia, dobro.rf is a digital platform for volunteer registration that offers national coverage with integrated governmental services and built-in analytics, enabling volunteers to register, make donations and participate in community events while providing data on volunteer activities across the country.[149] Such platforms can be particularly useful where other measurement approaches cannot be undertaken on the ground due to budgetary constraints or issues of access. In Mozambique, the e-Voluntários platform supports the accreditation and registration of volunteers, facilitating the measurement of related data.[150] This suggests how digital tools can both extend the reach of measurement and strengthen its reliability by combining online engagement data with structured accreditation systems.

4.4. Conclusion

Measuring the contributions that volunteering makes to health, well-being, skills and employability provides a fuller picture of its value to individuals. There are also connections between these contributions. The potential volunteering has to develop self-esteem is both a soft skill and a well-being outcome. Effective measurement approaches can reveal how volunteering supports individuals across different aspects of life, while also highlighting the personal challenges they encounter.

Evidence on how volunteering affects individuals' health, well-being, skills and employability therefore help interest groups to better allocate resources and foster stronger partnerships, reinforcing the role of volunteering in contributing to civil society. Measurement must strike a balance between global frameworks and context-specific insights that respect local realities and the diverse contributions volunteers make. Mixed methods and triangulation remain particularly valuable for capturing these multidimensional impacts. When the impact of volunteering on individuals is measured more accurately, effectively and holistically, the benefits of volunteering can be accessed by a wider number of individuals, particularly those in developing countries and in marginalized communities where skills and employability needs are often the greatest.

International UN Volunteer Mackendy Jeunay, Communication for Social and Behavioural change Officer Implemented social & behavioural change activities in Congo.
Credit: UNV 2025

Mazayannisa Suyuthi, National UN Volunteer Specialist, serving as Volunteerism Mainstreaming Officer, with RCO Indonesia. *Credit: UNV 2023*

5

MEASURING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF VOLUNTEERING TO DEVELOPMENT

Key messages

- **Volunteering has multiple impacts on development outcomes across economic development, health and education.** Capturing this information requires nuanced and context-specific measurement that can respond to the complex ways that change occurs because of volunteering.
- **Measuring the economic dimensions of volunteering has diversified** beyond monetary valuation to analysing the longer-term economic effects of changes in well-being, empowerment and community cohesion. This can help recognize, support and develop a wider range of voluntary activities.
- **Recent developments in measuring health volunteering increasingly recognize the work of informal and community volunteers** and their contributions to wider health-related development outcomes, which can be more relational and less tangible, often neglected by reporting and measurement approaches.
- **Volunteer contributions to formal and informal education systems are wide-ranging,** requiring measurement approaches that capture their impact not only on teaching and learning, but also on broader outcomes such as inclusion, retention and community engagement.
- **Innovative and mixed-methods approaches, including participatory methods, are needed to engage diverse actors** and shape meaningful and relevant measurement outcomes that can capture nuanced change. These approaches create opportunities to track the specific and varied ways volunteering drives development across and between sectors.
- **Collecting and analysing disaggregated data** is essential to understand how volunteering can help reduce inequalities in society and ensure programmes do not inadvertently reinforce the status quo.

5.1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that volunteers play a critical role in development. This chapter focuses on measuring volunteers' contributions to economic growth, health and education as well as tackling inequality, especially gender inequality, which have been identified as key dimensions of development. Measuring volunteer contributions to other important development outcomes, including around climate and human rights, is covered elsewhere in this report.

The strategic importance of volunteers to sustainable development has been emphasized in global forums, and their roles in enhancing accountability, social cohesion and inclusivity, while supporting the Leave No One Behind agenda, have been highlighted.[151] UNV country-level reports highlight the critical role of formal and informal volunteering in supporting national progress towards the SDGs.[152] These analyses emphasize the urgent need for systematic and multidimensional data gathering to enable governments and organizations in both the Global North and Global South to understand the scale and nature of this contribution to improving societal outcomes. Change and development is complex and non-linear and it is not always straightforward to evaluate the ways in which volunteering contributes. It is therefore essential that measurement approaches capture the contributions of diverse types of volunteers, including community-based volunteers, to understand the distinct impacts of volunteer efforts on key development outcomes. Examples from the Global South provide particularly innovative and effective illustrations of measurement in this context.

5.2. Measuring volunteer contributions to economic development

Economic development is a multidimensional concept that has evolved significantly over the past century. While GDP is recognized as the dominant measure of economic growth (see also chapter 2), its limitations – such as failing to capture social and non-market contributions – have led to the development of broader approaches.[153] These include indicators focused on basic human needs, inequality and well-being, such as the Human Development Index.[154]

Table 5.1 Overview of methods for measuring the economic dimensions of volunteering

Method	Purpose	Best used for	Strengths	Potential risks of misapplication or misinterpretation
Replacement cost approach	To estimate the economic value of volunteer time using labour-market equivalents	National statistics, macroeconomic comparisons (e.g. GDP)	Clear, scalable and comparable across contexts	May be seen as a full measure of value; risks reducing volunteering to monetary terms only
Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA) / Percent Personnel Value Extended (PPVE)	Assess the value and efficiency of volunteering at the programme or organizational level	Programme evaluation, internal reporting, advocacy	Easy to apply; highlights return on investment	Can oversimplify complex outcomes; limited comparability across contexts
Social Return on Investment (SROI)	Compare the social value generated with the resources invested	Programme evaluation, impact reporting, funding justification	Captures diverse outcomes, including stakeholder perspectives	Resource-intensive; sensitive to assumptions; may overstate the value
Impact evaluation (qualitative or mixed methods)	Identify specific changes and outcomes attributable to volunteering	Community development, education, health and social care	Contextualized, flexible, enables deep understanding	Causal links may be unclear; results are not always generalizable
Well-being metrics	Measure subjective benefits to volunteers and beneficiaries	Mental health, personal development, social cohesion	Reflects lived experience; aligns with broader development goals	Results can be influenced by short-term factors or self-reporting bias
Digital and real-time analytics	Use apps and platforms to monitor and analyse volunteer activity	Digital volunteering, youth engagement, rapid feedback	Timely, scalable, allows behavioural insights	Risk of digital exclusion; concerns over privacy and algorithmic bias

Recognizing this diversity in definitions and metrics is essential when assessing the economic contributions of volunteering. It reinforces the need for flexible, context-sensitive measurement approaches that reflect not only the monetary value of volunteering but also its social and human benefits.

Just as the understanding of economic development has evolved beyond measures of national income, so too have the approaches used to measure the economic dimensions of volunteering. Earlier methods focused on assigning a monetary value to volunteer time (see also chapter 2). By translating volunteer contributions into economic terms, these approaches brought previously invisible, unpaid work into general economic and political discussions. Previous estimates of global volunteering suggest that if all the world's volunteers formed a single country, it would be the second most populous country in the world, with an economy ranking among the largest in the world when compared to national GDPs.[155] Applying this method in China showed that volunteer work was valued at approximately US$ 27 billion,[156] equivalent to 15.82 per cent of GDP.[157] In Kenya, the same exercise revealed that more than 13 million registered volunteers contributed around US$ 1.8 billion[158] or 3.66 per cent of GDP.[159]

While such figures highlight the sheer scale of voluntary activity, they also reveal the limits of monetary valuation, which cannot capture the broader outcomes of volunteering. This emphasizes the need for more innovative and outcome-oriented approaches.

5.2.1 Innovative approaches to measuring the value of volunteering for economic development

Measuring the contribution of volunteering to economic development remains a complex and continually evolving challenge. Some approaches focus on quantitative data, such as the Spanish Volunteering Platform which assesses employability, labour-market participation, health system savings and broader social impact through volunteer responses, combined with cost-benefit analysis. Other approaches rely on qualitative or mixed-method designs that capture outcomes expressed in non-monetary terms – such as well-being, empowerment and community cohesion – and link them to longer-term economic effects. This diversity has enriched the understanding of the economic contribution of volunteering, while also making it more complex to choose methods and interpret results. Furthermore, each method carries assumptions about what counts as 'value', which may reflect external priorities as much as local realities.[160]

Table 5.1 summarizes the key approaches to measuring the economic value of volunteering, outlining the main purpose, typical applications, major strengths and potential risks of misinterpretation of each of the methods. The table illustrates the breadth of the economic lens, showing that methods such as impact evaluations, well-being metrics and digital analytics, though not always viewed as strictly economic, are vital for capturing forms of value that conventional indicators may overlook.

While well-being metrics overlap with the social and health dimensions discussed elsewhere in this Report, their inclusion here highlights how subjective benefits (such as improved mental health, resilience, social cohesion) can also translate into economic value through reduced costs, enhanced productivity and stronger social capital.

Tools such as the Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA) tool (see Case Study Box 5.1) and the Percent Personnel Value Extended (PPVE)[161] help organizations understand how much value they gain from every dollar or hour invested in volunteering. Grounded in cost-benefit logic, these methods need to be carefully applied and interpreted to avoid over-simplified or biased conclusions. They are especially useful for programme

Box 5.1. Measuring volunteer investment and economic value: A cost-benefit analysis[163]

The Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA) tool provides a simple yet effective method of measuring and communicating the value of volunteering. In a sociopolitical environment where financial arguments often influence decisions, particularly in resource-limited settings, this framework provides evidence that can support decision-making. Importantly, it also highlights that the value of volunteering is neither solely financial nor a substitute for paid work.

At its core, the VIVA is a cost-benefit tool. It calculates the ratio between the costs of running a volunteering programme and the economic value generated in context-specific terms. Input costs include the salaries of volunteer managers and reimbursements for volunteer expenses. Outputs are calculated by applying a wage rate – often an average or sector-specific rate rather than the minimum wage – to the total number of volunteer hours over a set period. A positive ratio demonstrates the programme's cost effectiveness.

Applying the VIVA typically provides interest groups with three main insights. Firstly, that volunteering is not free. Investment in infrastructure, staffing and volunteer support is essential for volunteers to thrive. Secondly, it captures the full extent of volunteer contributions through a financial and operational overview. Thirdly, it creates a structured system for collecting and managing volunteer data, allowing for more informed decisions to be made about programme design and delivery. This measurement strategy has enabled organizations worldwide to view their volunteering activities through a return-on-investment lens, recognizing that achieving meaningful impact on development outcomes through volunteering requires deliberate, upfront investment.

evaluation, strategic planning and advocacy. In their absence, the economic case for sustained investment often relies on partial inputs (e.g. hours alone) rather than metrics that enable comparisons of value.[162]

VIVA and PPVE are tools which can demonstrate the efficiency and value-for-money of volunteer programmes. This is directly relevant for governments and funders when allocating public budgets, as it shows whether investment in volunteering generates measurable economic returns compared to alternative uses of resources.

The social return on investment (SROI) model, adapted from the business sector, goes beyond counting numbers by connecting volunteering to broader social outcomes such as enhanced community well-being, greater inclusion and stronger local networks. It treats volunteering both as an input (e.g. time and expertise) and as an outcome (e.g. resilience, trust and empowerment).[164] The key strength of the SROI model lies in capturing intangible but essential impacts that monetary metrics often miss.[165] However, it is data- and resource-intensive, which may limit its use for smaller organizations or in low-resource contexts. Nevertheless, the SROI model has been used in Afghanistan to quantify the long-term benefits of volunteer efforts such as improved employability, household income gains, reduced health-related costs and strengthened community resilience.[166] Although often seen as a general evaluation tool, SROI has strong economic relevance because many of the outcomes it captures – such as improved employability, reduced health costs and stronger community networks – translate into long-term savings or productivity gains. This links volunteering directly to macrolevel economic development priorities.

In general, insufficient critical reflection on how the economic dimension of volunteering is measured can lead to misinterpretation. Without proper contextualization, economic indicators may overstate impact or obscure significant contributions. This is especially concerning when such data is used to inform policy or funding decisions.[167]

The way measurement is framed determines what becomes visible. Economic tools such as replacement cost or full-time equivalent make volunteer contributions more visible within budgeting frameworks.

International UN Youth Volunteer Kyra Grace Haberlin is a Climate Change and Youth Associate with UNRCO in the Federated States of Micronesia. *Credit: UNV 2023*

However, these tools often emphasize measurable labour inputs over social or developmental outcomes. When used alone, they risk portraying volunteering as a substitute for paid work, rather than as a distinct and transformative form of engagement.[168] Beyond individual tools, system-level frameworks such as the United Nations Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions and the ILO Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work[169] provide international standards for valuing volunteer contributions. National Satellite Accounts, adopted in several countries, integrate these measures into national economic statistics, offering a more comprehensive picture of how volunteering contributes to GDP and beyond. While less visible to practitioners, these frameworks are important for ensuring comparability and policy relevance at the macroeconomic level.

When traditional economic indicators dominate, there is a risk that volunteering is reduced to cost savings or productivity gains rather than being recognized as a form of civic participation or community ownership. Over time, this can narrow the forms of volunteering that

are valued and supported, underscoring the need for complementary measurement approaches. Transparency about methods, their assumptions and limitations in measuring the value of volunteering for economic development, is crucial to ensure that measurement serves as a tool for constant learning and improvement, rather than becoming a mere reporting exercise.

5.3 Measuring volunteer contributions to societal health outcomes

Health is a foundation for peace and security that depends on cooperation between individuals and across states.[170] This is reflected in health programmes that are central to local and community planning and form a core part of the wider welfare infrastructure. Reducing health inequalities is therefore a fundamental component of global development. Volunteers are actively engaged in delivering health services, raising awareness, strengthening health programmes and building community resilience during health crises.

The roles of volunteers in health care include community health volunteers (CHVs), Lay Health Workers and Health Promoters within structured, community-based networks, alongside informal volunteering at a household or village level.[171] Qualified healthcare professionals volunteer alongside their professional roles, including medics undertaking missions and pro bono work.[172,173] Medical students in the Global North often volunteer in the Global South, although the ethical dilemmas of this are now widely recognized.[174] Alongside these roles, local health professionals and specialists in women's health (e.g. volunteer midwives and reproductive health promoters) play important roles, as do mental health practitioners. While this diversity is central to the value of volunteering in advancing societal health outcomes, it also makes the task of tracking and measuring volunteers' contributions complex. There are also important questions around who should be counted as a volunteer in this context.

Historically, evidence-based health policy centred on randomized controlled trials, measuring change through outputs and causal patterns.[175] More recent developments in measurement expand on these foundations, recognizing that informal health volunteering activities might otherwise go unnoticed.

Théo Martin, with FAO on an assignment funded by the Government of France, supports the Farmer-Field-School and Climate Resilience Project by conducting a fact-finding mission for vegetable planting in Senegal. *Credit: UNV 2017*

5.3.1 Measuring volunteer contributions in health

Understanding the scale of volunteer contributions is important in health-related initiatives which rely on volunteers to sustain interventions. End-of-life care engages large numbers of non-professionalized volunteers,[176] while large-scale immunization campaigns and community health care require sustained commitment by trained volunteers.[177] Measuring these contributions enables policymakers to understand the importance of volunteer labour in achieving health outcomes.

Volunteer health programmes are often coordinated by local authorities, NGOs, individual healthcare providers and national government schemes, each with differing data-gathering capacities. State-sponsored initiatives are particularly well-placed to capture the scale of health volunteering, as evidenced in China and Indonesia.[178] In Thailand, the contribution of more than one million village health volunteers[179] is measured by the Ministry of Public Health, using the ILO Current Wage Method. Beyond the national

> *What we need in humanitarian response is not just people, but truly humane people. That's what defines volunteers: being fully, deeply human in the face of the greatest injustices.*
>
> Catalina Ignacia Lam Órdenes, UN Volunteer with UNICEF in Chile

level, international organizations also collect data on the scale of health volunteer impact. The Big Six youth organizations reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery, 218,692 young volunteers were mobilized across 56 countries.[180]

In addition to counting volunteer numbers, measuring the time they commit offers another way to capture the scale of contributions to health-related outcomes, especially where informal labour is less visible and harder to track. Volunteer mediators and health promoters are crucial to delivering health programmes in marginalized, remote and under-resourced contexts where they contribute distinctive qualities such as peer-based empathetic approaches, use of local language and culture, building understanding and trust and role modelling. Their contributions often span an extended time frame of several years, making it particularly important to measure the time they commit to volunteering.[181]

Efforts to measure the often-unpaid time spent by CHVs have used mixed methods, including questionnaires, observation and time diaries.[182] These approaches show that volunteer contributions represent significant economic value. However, they also present methodological challenges, including how to calculate an appropriate replacement cost for labour and reconciling differences between observed and self-reported time.[183] Additionally, volunteering is not always a linear, consistent activity. Some health volunteering is episodic, either periodic (e.g. one week every year) or occurring in response to circumstances such as a disaster, conflict or outbreak of a viral disease.[184] Measurement approaches need to be flexible enough to capture the value of this episodic and crisis-driven volunteering.

The impact of volunteer contributions can also be measured through health statistics. Pre- and post- intervention metrics allow organizations to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention and to understand how health volunteers drive change at a community level. For example, in Yemen, surveys have been used to measure vaccination coverage, malnutrition and morbidity across villages with and without CHVs.[185]

As well as monitoring and evaluation carried out by the organizations themselves, official statistics demonstrate volunteer-driven change in health outcomes at the local level. In Zambia, the incidence of cholera cases declined after the Integrated Community Strategy for Cholera Control was implemented by volunteers.[186] In the United States, changes in immunization rates in New York have been used to evaluate the effectiveness of a volunteer-driven immunization programme.[187] However, pre- and post-studies of this nature often struggle to separate the effects of volunteering from other factors, as volunteering rarely takes place as a neatly contained intervention. These examples highlight the importance of triangulating data from multiple sources.

Large secondary datasets can also reveal volunteer impact on societal outcomes. In West Africa, a cross-national analysis combining survey, health and census data showed that that the duration of Ebola was shorter in areas with greater participation in voluntary and religious organizations.[188] Evidence also linked higher levels of formal volunteering with lower mortality in high-income settings during COVID-19.[189] However, although local and community volunteers played a critical role in supporting vulnerable groups during the pandemic, much of this informal activity fell outside official reporting systems.[190] This emphasizes the ongoing challenge of capturing the full impact of volunteering on outcomes such as mortality, when informal contributions of volunteers are often under-recorded.

Combining qualitative and quantitative measurement tools helps overcome these limitations. The example of Camminare Insieme in

Italy demonstrates the value of mixed methods approaches, capturing dimensions of health volunteering that cannot be quantified, such as the emotional labour and advocacy of volunteer doctors supporting refugee and migrant health care (see Case Study Box 5.2).

5.3.2. Innovative approaches to measuring the impact of volunteering on health

A multidimensional approach is essential for robust and actionable evidence of volunteer impact on health, including its long-term outcomes.[192] Innovative approaches capture the less tangible impacts of health volunteering, for example the emotional support provided by clown doctor volunteers to hospitalized children in Colombia.[193] In England, a study of low-income communities combined questionnaires with individual and group interviews to assess the experiences of women receiving volunteer doula support, showing how health volunteering offers qualitatively different outcomes to those of healthcare professionals.[194]

Engaging with the perspectives of diverse stakeholders helps capture some of the less tangible impacts of health volunteering. As well as gathering views from volunteers, insights from patients, healthcare workers, programme managers and communities strengthen programming by highlighting priorities and outcomes. In Ghana, community voices play a critical role in measuring volunteer impact and shaping healthcare policy.[195] Community scorecards have also been used to enable community members to monitor and measure the quality of healthcare services supported by volunteers by reflecting on experiences such as waiting times and medical availability.[196]

Innovative methods such as storytelling and audio diaries provided alternative means of capturing nuanced perceptions of the impact volunteers have on health-related societal outcomes in Italy.[197] In Uganda, photovoice was used to explore the different impacts of male and female CHVs.[198] Although their responsibilities were technically the same, this visual method revealed the gendered nature of their roles, which other approaches might have struggled to capture. This deepened understanding of the gendered norms shaping volunteer health work and informed decision-making processes.

Box 5.2. Measuring the impact of volunteer doctors on refugee and migrant healthcare[191]

Around the world, volunteers play a vital role in improving access to health care, particularly for communities facing socioeconomic challenges. This is particularly relevant for refugees and migrants, who may encounter barriers to formal health systems due to language, legal status or other factors. Work with volunteer doctors in Europe shows how combining measurement tools can capture the contribution of volunteering to improving health outcomes. This includes the relational aspects of volunteering and the emotional impact of this work on volunteers and the people they serve.

At the volunteer-run local healthcare clinic known as Camminare Insieme (Walking Together) in Turin, Italy, conventional volunteer metrics, such as hours volunteered and patient numbers, provide useful but incomplete information about the impact of volunteering. The volunteer doctors, many of whom are migrants themselves, provide medical consultations, explain treatment plans in multiple languages and guide patients through hospital procedures. They also help with registration in the healthcare system. These voluntary actions improve patient follow-up, adherence to treatment and confidence in seeking care, aspects which are not often captured in existing metrics. A mixed-methods approach to measurement therefore provides a clearer picture of outcomes. Quantitative data recorded volunteer consultations, referrals and completed treatments. Qualitative interviews and participatory engagement with volunteers and patients documented the impact of trust building, cultural mediation and problem-solving skills among volunteers. Together, these methods demonstrate how volunteers can increase access to services and improve health outcomes in ways that activity counts alone cannot show.

This example challenges policymakers and researchers to rethink how volunteering is measured in the health sector. It advocates for approaches that go beyond existing metrics to acknowledge the transformative effects of volunteering in the fight against health inequalities and in fostering social change.

Box 5.3. Strengthening health and education in Togo through volunteering [199]

Measuring how volunteers contribute to progress towards health, education and other SDGs requires ongoing collaboration across different groups. The Civic Engagement Volunteering Program in Togo builds on earlier research to understand how a combination of structured measurement methods makes the value of volunteering visible, strengthening its role in local development.

This programme is led by the National Agency for Volunteerism in Togo (ANVT), previously supported by the country's National Economic and Demographic Statistics Institute. It measured the contributions volunteers made to health and education outcomes at local, regional and national levels in the country. In education, the pupil-teacher ratio and pass rates for lower and upper secondary examinations were evaluated. In the field of health, volunteer contributions to the fight against communicable diseases (i.e. malaria and HIV) and to improving maternal health were measured. In both sectors, the financial cost-benefit ratio of involving volunteers was also analysed.

Based on the findings, the Civic Engagement Volunteering Program's measurement system has since been built around three elements. It first developed specific tools to track volunteer contributions, including a logical framework, a dashboard to monitor activities in real time and standardized data-collection sheets. Data are then collected and verified through a multilevel process. Locally, information on volunteer performance is gathered and verified by supervisors, host organizations and community representatives to ensure accuracy. This data is then consolidated regionally and centralized nationally to produce reports and statistics on the contribution of volunteerism to development objectives.

This has helped embed volunteering in the country's national decentralization strategy and has strengthened advocacy for policy recognition and support. The programme has also created inclusive forums where volunteers, communities, local authorities and host organizations share experiences, challenges and lessons. This ensures that measurement provides insights into why initiatives succeed or fail. Involving different groups builds trust and increases ownership of the programme.

This example shows that structured measurement of volunteering is an evolving process, requiring ongoing collaboration across multiple groups to build and sustain effective systems which demonstrate the contributions volunteering makes to development outcomes, particularly in health and education.

Context-specific approaches to measuring the grassroots impacts of volunteering are crucial for informing purposeful programming across sectors. The experience from Togo illustrates how a combination of approaches in structured measurement systems can make volunteer contributions to health and education visible at local, regional and national levels (see Case Study Box 5.3).

5.4 Measuring volunteer contributions in education

Education is central to the global development agenda, with a focus on improving school enrolment and attendance, reducing illiteracy and innumeracy and ensuring gender-equitable, lifelong access to quality learning at all levels.[200] Understanding volunteer contributions in education is complex because of the varied roles volunteers play worldwide across formal and informal education systems. This includes supporting curriculum development, teaching, classroom support, gender equality work and student retention.[201] Volunteers also engage in school governance through parent-teacher associations and by supporting community hubs that stay open beyond class hours. Families are active both as volunteers and as the direct or indirect beneficiaries of these initiatives. They also undertake collective action such as campaigning and advocacy to improve school governance and enforce educational rights for girls.[202]

In some contexts, volunteers fill service provision gaps by teaching in disadvantaged areas or in crisis situations. One important dimension is the provision of online activities such as remote schooling. These efforts gained particular attention during COVID-19,especially in rural areas and among displaced populations, when digital inequalities reinforced barriers and gender disparities. [203]

When volunteers are formally recruited, trained or receive stipends, their numbers tend to be captured within monitoring systems. However, other dimensions – such as the number of hours of instruction they provide, the number of students reached and improvements in learning outcomes linked to volunteer engagement – are less consistently measured. Organizations typically collect data on international volunteer placements in educational settings through surveys, which tend to focus on the individual impact on volunteers, such as changes in intercultural awareness, skills and confidence [204] **(see chapter 4)**. However, as discussed elsewhere in this Report, the work of informal and community-based volunteers, such as those working directly with schools or through self-help groups and in lower-income contexts, often goes unreported.

The contribution volunteering makes to education outcomes can be measured through changes in attendance levels, confidence, aspirations, educational achievement and attitudes towards girls' education. In Togo, the impact of volunteer teachers was evidenced through reduced class sizes and improved learning outcomes, advancing progress towards the goal of ensuring that children complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education (see Case Study Box 5.3).

When volunteering forms part of a structured project or programme, baseline and endline data within education monitoring systems can track change over time, often using surveys or organizational performance analysis. The World Organization of the Scout Movement systematically measures volunteer contributions across 95 per cent of its National Scout Organizations, leveraging its non-formal education approach to strengthen community impact and institutional capacity. A digital platform records volunteer hours, project indicators, financial data and qualitative insights, helping the organization assess value-for-money, efficiency and the differences between funded and non-funded work (see Case Study Box 5.4).

Box 5.4. Balancing global reach and inclusivity to measure volunteer impact on community development [205]

For organizations, especially those operating globally, striking the right balance between scale, programme effectiveness and inclusivity is vital in order to measure the impact of volunteers on development outcomes. The Scouts for SDGs initiative, led by the WOSM, has mobilized more than 54 million young people across 176 countries since 2018. Through non-formal education, it strengthens both community impact and institutional capacity by encouraging active citizenship across different age groups.

Scouting applies a holistic framework to measure volunteerism, integrating competency development, emotional engagement and cost-efficiency. This approach combines quantitative data, such as service hours and reach, with qualitative insights, including volunteer satisfaction and role clarity. Adopted by 95 per cent of National Scout Organizations, it captures both funded and non-funded actions. Since its inception, the system has logged 2.7 billion service hours from 16 million non-funded activities, benchmarked against funded projects. The value-for-money model reveals costs as low as US$ 0.001 per beneficiary for non-funded initiatives, underscoring efficiency without undermining inclusivity.

By embedding SDG-aligned actions within programmes, the WSOM has established a replicable system to track the impact of decentralized, youth-led volunteering worldwide. Digital platforms allow volunteers to record indicators, financial data and provide photographic evidence, enabling coordination and storytelling. By tracking millions of service hours and capturing outcomes generated by 35,000 monthly users of the World Scouting platform, measurement shows how volunteering contributes to community improvements and strengthens life skills. A global study found that Scouts volunteers performed 16.2 per cent better than non-Scouts in competencies such as teamwork and leadership. [206]

This evidence can also inform strategy and investment priorities, particularly those tailored to enhance education as a development outcome. In Poland, the Polish Scouting and Guiding Association

(ZHP) tailored global initiatives (e.g. the Messengers of Peace and Earth Tribe initiatives) to local contexts, resulting in a 20 per cent increase in youth volunteering for peacebuilding and environmental projects within one year, demonstrating that evidence-driven strategies can enhance the impact of volunteering. In India, the Bharat Scouts and Guides incorporated SDG-focused education into their programmes, achieving a 30 per cent improvement in knowledge scores and enhanced civic participation, highlighting the quantifiable value of volunteer-driven initiatives.

These examples demonstrate that by combining large-scale data with context-specific insights, global organizations can measure both the reach and sustainability of volunteer action, reinforcing their role in advancing the SDGs.

Selamawit Lake Fanta, UN Volunteer International Midwifery Educator with UNICEF, demonstrates checking a baby's heartbeat using a Pinard stethoscope in India.
Credit: UNV 2024

In emergency situations and remote areas, volunteers often fill critical gaps, such as teaching in under-resourced schools. Their impact in these contexts is commonly assessed through quantitative indicators such as attendance rates, test score improvements and access to learning materials. But research shows that volunteer teachers also, at times, provide financial support and teaching materials to students.[207] Being able to capture such contributions is essential in ensuring stakeholders have a comprehensive understanding of the significance of educational volunteering.

Qualitative methods are particularly helpful when it comes to understanding how reciprocal relationships are built over time to shape education outcomes. These approaches provide contextual evidence of how volunteers contribute not only to teaching and learning, but also to broader goals such as inclusion, retention and community engagement. Methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, journaling and classroom observations can capture the perspectives of students, parents, teachers, community members, staff and policymakers for multidimensional measurement. They can be integrated into routine monitoring or programme evaluations and can be combined with quantitative data to strengthen the evidence base.

In Nepal, the VSO Sisters for Sisters initiative pairs girls who are at risk of dropping out of school or failing to transition into secondary education with volunteer mentors, also girls, who share similar lived experiences. The measurement approach taken by the project assessed changes in life skills, self-confidence and self-esteem for the 'little sisters', and employability skills for their 'big sister' volunteer mentors. Interviews, focus groups and analysis of internal documents provided diverse qualitative data to measure the impact of volunteering in addressing educational inequalities.[208]

Vibhu Sharma, International UN Volunteer Associate Policy Officer, helped shape disability inclusion policies and accommodation guidance at the UN in New York. *Credit: UNV 2024*

5.4.1. Measuring volunteer impact through education-related outcomes

Impact evaluations in education assess whether interventions directly improve learning or related educational outcomes, moving beyond describing progress or perceptions to answer cause-and-effect questions.[209] They often use experimental methods, such as randomized control trials or quasi-experimental designs, which compare results with and without the intervention. Volunteer contributions in education settings can be evaluated using this approach – for example, introducing volunteer mentors in some schools but not others or randomly assigning extra lessons from volunteers to certain students and comparing exam results. These approaches, often regarded as the 'gold standard' by donors and regulators, remain common in education contexts, particularly in the Global South.[210]

Over time, however, experimental strategies have been criticized as being difficult to apply in real-world education settings, where it is complex to create comparable groups and randomize access to volunteering initiatives. Ethical concerns also arise when support is deliberately withheld from some students or schools. In addition, such studies are costly and often have limited generalizability. Reviews of education projects suggest that evaluation resources are often better spent on gathering information to improve project performance than on assessing impact alone.[211]

Statistical modelling can estimate impact by analysing cause-and-effect relationships, often in longitudinal studies that disentangle multiple influences on a single observed outcome, as highlighted from field experiences in Pakistan.[212] Yet, as in the health sector, it can be difficult to isolate volunteering as a single causal factor affecting educational outcomes.

Theory-based methods have been increasingly used to assess volunteering in education projects by focusing on understanding why and how interventions lead (or do not lead) to outcomes. By examining causal pathways, mechanisms and contextual factors in a theory of change,[213] these approaches help to explain the impact of volunteer-based educational initiatives, which may otherwise take years to emerge.[214] They do, however, require some identifiable change, making them less useful in early-stage or highly experimental projects where outcomes have not yet been defined. Examples include outcome mapping, used to evaluate the technical assistance component of the Education Portfolio in India,[215] and realist evaluation, which ask what works, for whom, in what circumstances and why,[216] and which has been applied to evaluating education policy in Colombia.[217]

Together, these multidimensional approaches reveal not only whether volunteering initiatives work in the education sector, but also the different ways they generate change at community level.

5.4.2. Innovative approaches to measuring volunteer impact in education

Participatory approaches are widely used in education to capture the experiences of students, teachers and communities where volunteers

UN Volunteers supported the «Let›s Do It Bosnia and Herzegovina» campaign, which planted over 2,000 seedlings in six cities, including Sarajevo and Srebrenica, as part of a push to plant 1 million in one day. *Credit: UNV 2022*

are engaged. By working collaboratively with those directly involved, they support joint data analysis and grassroots reflections on change. These measurement approaches can contribute to shifting power dynamics by giving those most affected a direct role in analysis and by highlighting the work of community-based volunteers.[218]

The Participatory Action Research and Organisational Capacity Strengthening Project led by the Australian Volunteers Programme (AVP) illustrates how participatory methodologies help their partner organizations engaging volunteers in Fiji, Indonesia, Vietnam and Sri Lanka achieve locally-led change.[219] By centring local expertise, the project assessed how training, mentoring and collaboration with international volunteers introduced new perspectives and innovations that improved organizational capacity. Evidence shows that volunteers strengthened efficiency and networks at community level.[220]

The Most Significant Change approach is another example of a participatory evidence-gathering method used to monitor and evaluate the performance of educational programmes. This method involves collecting stories, usually from a service or programme, and systematically interpreting them in relation to change-making (see also chapter 2). In youth learning centres in the West Bank, young volunteers helped collect over 170 personal stories from peers, parents and teachers about the changes they had observed.[221] From these, participants selected the stories they felt represented the most meaningful outcomes achieved through volunteer activities.

Finally, photovoice has also been used as a participatory research method to better understand the outcomes of volunteer engagement in education settings. Volunteer students engaged in community-based service-learning projects in South Africa, for example, used photovoice to document and reflect on their experiences and impact on learners, communities, and their own volunteering practice.[222]

5.5. Measuring the contribution of volunteering to tackling inequalities

Volunteers make important contributions to addressing socioeconomic, environmental and political inequalities worldwide. Reducing inequalities within and between countries is fundamental to achieving global development. Where stark inequalities persist, whether economic, social, political or environmental, both sustainable development and social cohesion remain beyond reach.

Patterns of inequality are shaped by discrimination based on gender, race and ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality, religion and migration status. The COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated and deepened inequalities in volunteering in some contexts, as evidenced in Uganda.[223] Examples in this chapter underline the contribution volunteering can make to economic development, health and education, thereby tackling inequalities, promoting societal change and advancing the Leave No One Behind agenda.

Gender inequality remains one of the most persistent and cross-cutting forms of inequality worldwide.[224] When measuring efforts to address gender inequalities, quantitative methods can highlight specific outcomes of volunteering, such as reduced incidences of gender-based violence

> *When you're dealing with hundreds of thousands of refugees, you can't rely on assumptions. Data shows how many are women and children, how many are unaccompanied minors, or living with disabilities. That helps us design better, more targeted programmes.*
>
> Yoojeong Jeong, UN Volunteer Operational Data Management Associate with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

or improved access to maternal and reproductive health services. Yet, additional tools are needed to understand how volunteer programmes foster advocacy, empower women and girls in local communities and help shift attitudes towards gender equality. In Cambodia, Ghana, Kenya, Laos, Senegal and Vietnam, Veterinarians Without Borders North America uses mixed-method approaches to assess the impacts of its volunteer programme on strengthening the capacity of partner organizations that, in turn, support smallholder farmers, particularly women and girls.[225] By involving volunteers, local professionals, community leaders and farmers themselves in knowledge exchange, the measurement process becomes more participatory and responsive to local needs.

Qualitative measurement approaches – with volunteers, staff, partner organizations, community members and other interest groups – can reveal how societal norms shape inequalities in volunteer roles and responsibilities. In turn, this data can inform context-specific recommendations to support more inclusive and gender-sensitive volunteer initiatives. Listening sessions with Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers explored their experiences, challenges and coping strategies, generating new evidence on how gender shapes volunteering in various emergency contexts.[226] This showed how holistic approaches to measuring volunteering can reveal challenges and provide opportunities to challenge gendered social norms.

While volunteering often helps to reduce societal inequalities, this is not inevitable and it is important to ensure that volunteering initiatives do not themselves inadvertently widen inequalities.[227] Measurement tools must be sensitive enough to capture the changes in social inequalities resulting from volunteering activities, whether positive or negative. Social inequalities are reinforced where certain forms of volunteering are overlooked or undervalued, highlighting the need for measurement that recognizes the diversity of volunteer contributions.[228]

Samapti Chakma (right), UN Volunteer with UNDP, supports community-led climate adaptation in Rangamati, Bangladesh. Her assignment is funded by the Special Voluntary Fund (SVF). *Credit: UNV 2024*

Disaggregating data on volunteering is crucial for understanding gendered and other intersectional disparities.[229] This applies to levels of participation and engagement, roles and responsibilities and outcomes of volunteer programmes. To make this possible, it is important to collect information on the gender, age, disability, race and ethnicity of volunteers, while

also being sensitive to local contexts. Such disaggregation helps reveal how volunteering both reflects and impacts wider inequalities. Current reporting mechanisms do not always enable this and a lack of detailed data poses challenges to measurement efforts. A critical understanding of who is measuring volunteer contributions and how they are doing so is also important in assessing the ways in which volunteering may respond to inequalities. In the Sundarbans in India, a combination of participatory methods involving volunteers (i.e. photovoice, river of life, gender-specific workshops) and a gender-sensitive community mapping exercise, were particularly effective in exploring women's and men's volunteering roles, their distinct experiences and how they worked together or separately in their communities.[230]

While development interventions often mobilize narratives around women's empowerment through involvement in volunteering, this is not a given outcome.[231] When volunteer programmes do not challenge societal norms but instead reproduce expectations of women as unpaid caregivers, gender hierarchies can be reinforced, and women's social power and economic status might remain unchanged.[232] Measuring the impact of volunteering in diverse, inclusive ways can reveal underrepresented insights on the lived realities of volunteers. For example, mixed-methods measurement in Ethiopia revealed entrenched inequalities among female community health workers, leading to recommendations that volunteer programmes carefully manage selection and ensure women's participation does not deepen socioeconomic or health disparities.[233]

5.6. Conclusion

Volunteering has significant potential to tackle societal inequalities across health, education and economic development. However, this is not an inevitable outcome. Innovative measurement tools that produce disaggregated data are required if development impacts are to be better understood and tracked. Societal change does not happen overnight. Efforts to measure the contributions of volunteers should therefore enable interest groups to capture the longer-term effects of volunteering, evidencing reductions in inequalities and shifts in social norms and values over time. Measuring volunteer contributions to development also requires recognizing the interconnections between health, education and economic outcomes. Sexual and reproductive health education, for example, not only improves health but can also address gender inequality and support long-term economic stability. Educational attainment influences health outcomes, while health in turn affects learning and productivity. Demonstrating how volunteering contributes to these multidimensional impacts calls for complementary measurement approaches that combine insight from multiple datasets on development outcomes with the lived experiences of volunteers and the communities they support.

Innovative and participatory approaches are particularly valuable in involving a diverse range of people in assessing the impact of volunteer-engaging initiatives on their communities, allowing them to shape the outcomes of the measurement process in meaningful ways. It is vital that these measurement approaches capture less visible forms of volunteering, specifically informal and community volunteering. Together, such approaches can help to capture the unique societal benefits that arise specifically from volunteering, including how volunteering contributes to the Leave No One Behind agenda, builds more equitable relationships and generates new knowledge to support the achievement of crucial development outcomes.

A UN Volunteer, supports emergency response and early recovery in Ecuador after an earthquake.
Credit: UNV 2016

6

MEASURING VOLUNTEERING DURING MULTIPLE GLOBAL CRISES

Key messages

- **Volunteers lead efforts in addressing the complex and interconnected issues arising from multiple simultaneous crises,** providing vital immediate relief, long-term recovery and encouraging community resilience over time.
- **Existing measurement frameworks often view crises separately,** or focus on immediate response phases, neglecting the full scope of the diverse and overlapping roles volunteers play in complex situations.
- **Integrated and innovative measurement can reveal information about the nature of volunteering and crisis dynamics.** It can show how volunteering evolves, its diversity, how it supports social networks and impacts on volunteers. It can also show how crises unfold and connect and where systems fail.
- **Adaptive, mixed-methods approaches which are developed collaboratively enable flexible measurement** that responds to complex, changing contexts and practices. Combining standard and locally devised metrics make comparison possible, while remaining sensitive to the changing nature of overlapping crises.
- **Participatory and locally grounded approaches can ensure that volunteers' voices are heard.** This can uncover hidden contributions – especially from marginalized groups – and track evolving roles, capacities and risks of volunteering. Such approaches support coordinated planning and responses which match community capacities and needs.
- **Measurement needs to reflect the cross-cutting response volunteers make to crises.** This leads to greater recognition, builds solidarity and encourages more just responses to multiple, overlapping crises. In doing so, measurement actively drives resilience, shapes governance and enables collective action.

6.1. Volunteering during multiple interlocking crises

In recent years there has been growing awareness of the effects that multiple global crises such as climate change, conflict and economic instability can have when they are no longer separate but are causally entangled.[234]

The United Nations Environment Programme has described the compounded nature of these events as when "two or more crises that may be independent or not, become causally entangled – i.e. the interactive effects among them escalate the severity of impacts of each – and thereby significantly degrade global planetary health and thus humanity's prospects for well-being in a relatively short period of time. These interacting, cascading series of events or sudden (non-linear) crises, across space and time, occur simultaneously and therefore produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected."[235]

Although this interaction between crises is not new, since the COVID-19 pandemic the world has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of interconnected challenges. Effects vary globally, with communities in the Global South often being disproportionately affected.[236]

Volunteers are at the forefront of efforts to confront these crises and respond to their combined effects. More than other actors, local volunteers often work within and between different crises simultaneously, providing immediate relief and long-term recovery as well as bridging these priorities. Grassroots efforts are central to holding communities together when systems are overwhelmed,[237] drawing on local knowledge to deal with the combined effects of crises on societies. Local, national and international volunteers play critical roles in crisis response, bringing new capacities, skills and knowledge to deal with sudden threats and the risks that compound the existing stresses faced by affected communities. These responses to overlapping crises can create a new set of opportunities, generating innovation, cross-sector collaboration and action that go beyond that which responses to single-crisis scenarios might achieve.

Volunteering cuts across the usual boundaries of humanitarian and development thinking and practice and volunteers often play roles that could be classified as both or neither humanitarian, nor development focused.

How volunteers experience crises does not necessarily align with the ways organizations respond to crises.[238] Volunteering cuts across the usual boundaries of humanitarian and development thinking and practice and volunteers often play roles that could be classified as both or neither humanitarian, nor development focused.[239] The same volunteer who rescues people spontaneously from the rubble after an earthquake can also be involved with an organization that cleans beaches to prevent waste from polluting the sea. They may deliver food to neighbours in hospital and foster social cohesion by providing psychosocial support to bereaved individuals, often despite their own mental burdens.[240] In a world fractured by intersecting crises, volunteers are important because they work across multiple challenges and contexts, flexibly and responsively.

The agility and flexibility of volunteering, particularly during crises, create challenges for measuring and understanding its scope and impact. Volunteer contributions are often perceived as part of everyday coping strategies and solidarity[241] rather than being recognized as volunteering.[242] Because so much of this voluntary labour remains unaccounted for,[243] the impact of volunteers on meeting current crises remains only partially understood. Volunteers' contributions cut across the priorities of different organizations, may not match the timescales of projects and can vary in the depth of their engagement depending on their circumstances. Volunteers may play a pivotal role in addressing the consequences of crises but are not immune to these same consequences. In some instances, volunteers might face increased risk, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Assessing the impact of a crisis on volunteering is also critical to ensuring that the environments which enable volunteering to take place are protected and nurtured.

Zxyleman Nor (right), UN Volunteer with OCHA, engages with UN Resident Coordinator Gustavo Gonzales in the Philippines, to read: Zxyleman Nor (right), UN Volunteer with OCHA, engages with UN Resident Coordinator Gustavo Gonzales in the Philippines.
Credit: UNV 2024

Existing approaches to measuring volunteering tend to consider crises or projects in isolation. While this can provide a vital initial snapshot of who is helping and how, providing key information from the front-line of a crisis, the flexibility and responsiveness of volunteers as they navigate unpredictable and dynamic environments often does not fit conventional

approaches to planning interventions or measuring impact. This means that the complexity and contribution of volunteering in the multiple crisis contexts may be missed. Evidence of the ways volunteering can simultaneously address individual, societal and planetary challenges can provide insights that shape the design of wider responses. Connecting volunteer measurement to other data on crises can help better match volunteering to the challenges these crises bring. Measuring volunteering therefore needs to extend beyond individual projects, sectors and moments in time. It also needs to extend beyond counting participation or assessing the impact of isolated acts or initiatives. It involves recognizing how diverse forms of volunteering connect and reinforce one another across different types of response. In this way, measurement can also reveal how crises occur, how they connect and where and how systems fail. By drawing on examples from different types of crises and their interconnections, this chapter shows how innovative measurement approaches can capture the role of volunteering in addressing intersecting challenges – and why this matters.

Ji Sun Park, International UN Volunteer with UNDP, supports gender mainstreaming in the unexploded ordnance (UXO) sector in Lao PDR. *Credit: UNV 2022*

6.1.1 The relevance of measuring volunteering during multiple interlocking crises

Volunteers respond to overlapping crises around the world on a daily basis, often addressing gaps where formal systems are under strain.[244] In Ukraine, for example, volunteers are key to providing humanitarian aid as well as legal and psychological assistance to both civilians and military personnel.[245] In the Democratic Republic of Congo, community volunteers have been involved in governance and peace meetings to address issues of displacement and conflict, while also contributing to peacebuilding efforts.[246]

Volunteers support refugees worldwide, including through advocacy and the promotion of refugee rights in Europe.[247] Increasing evidence also shows how refugees are not only recipients of aid, but are actively volunteering in their communities in Africa and the Middle East.[248] As part of disaster risk reduction activities, volunteers assist with flood preparedness in Thailand,[249] while in India[250] they help to manage cyclone shelters and build climate-resilient housing. Volunteers play a key role in everyday mitigation and adaptation efforts, for example, by planting trees in the United States,[251] reforesting in Cameroon[252] and cleaning up coastlines[253] around the world.

Volunteers also actively contribute to the development of long-term capacity for climate action by advocating for climate justice in the Pacific Island countries[254] and promoting new approaches to livelihoods in Benin.[255] As well as providing on-site work during crises, digital volunteers translate information, map affected areas and verify data and share resources, supporting both populations and responders, as seen around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic[256] and during the recent flood response in China.[257]

Immediate crisis responses may be easier to measure, taking place at times of heightened attention and concern, and producing visible and organized volunteer responses.[258] However, as crises become more complex and interconnected, more nuanced measurement is needed to help a range of actors navigate these multiple challenges more effectively. Measuring volunteering can reveal how crises develop and are experienced by capturing the ongoing, immediate and adaptive responses of communities

Fatoumata Abdoulaye is a Communication & Community Engagement Assistant with WFP in Mali. *Credit: UNV 2024*

as they face overlapping stresses and shocks. Tracking volunteer actions may show how certain events trigger or compound each other, helping identify effective and targeted support and interventions.

Volunteering in a context of multiple crises is not only about providing an immediate response. By reinforcing the bonds that help communities act collectively under pressure, volunteering can support and build the trust, networks and continuity that are the foundations of long-term resilience. Measurement approaches need to capture these different contributions and their different roles in responding to crises.

Measuring the diverse contributions and forms of volunteering and understanding how volunteering is embedded in societies and changes over time, makes it possible to recognize who is responding, how and under what conditions. It can reveal how the bottom-up, relationship-focused and often improvised nature of voluntary action can help communities respond to ongoing pressures, as well as mobilizing capacities in immediate crises. Overlooking these contributions because they are hard to measure, particularly in interconnected fragile and crisis-affected settings, risks underestimating the value and potential of volunteering. This knowledge can support more coordinated and effective crisis planning and response, for example in contexts of human mobility and displacement (see Case Study Box 6.1).

Box 6.1. Measuring volunteering in contexts of human mobility and displacement

A 2025 study published by UNV[259] revealed how volunteer efforts are shaped by and respond to experiences of displacement. It concluded that:

- *Volunteers address critical protection and service gaps:* In displacement settings, volunteers often fill roles in health, education, gender support and inclusion where formal systems fall short, particularly in emergencies and protracted crises.
- *Volunteering is connected to livelihoods:* For many displaced individuals, volunteering is closely linked to survival strategies. It provides access to social networks, skills and even income-generating opportunities, blurring the lines between civic action and economic need.
- *Volunteers influence governance and policy:* Displaced volunteers are much more than service-deliverers; they are also advocates, leaders and contributors to the shaping of migration and integration policy at local and national levels.
- *Ethical risks:* Volunteering in contexts of human mobility cannot be promoted without acknowledging the ethical risks of placing an additional burden on vulnerable individuals. Any effort to document or support volunteering in the context of displacement needs to consider power dynamics and the risks of exploitation.

The study recommends that governments provide indicators to track and measure volunteer contributions when including volunteering as a formal mechanism within national action plans in order to support safer and more effective responses to migration and displacement.

Measurement can expose the cumulative emotional, physical and social toll volunteers experience during crisis situations.[260] This evidence is particularly urgent in unstable situations where volunteers step into roles that formal actors – often better protected by organizational policies – cannot fulfil. It can also challenge accounts of volunteers which focus on their 'heroism' but in doing so, distract from their need for protection and support. Measurement that takes account of the lived experiences of volunteers,[261] and the conditions in which they volunteer, can support policies and practices that acknowledge and address volunteers' understanding of the risks they face. This can lead to safer and more sustainable responses to crises.

6.2. Innovative approaches to measuring volunteering during times of crisis

Measuring volunteering in situations where multiple crises are overlapping is complex and requires methods that can capture its flexibility and how it is embedded in society. Because no single method is sufficient – and not everything can or should be documented – a creative, mixed-methods approach is needed. Such an approach can better capture the evolving, context-specific and relational dimensions of volunteering that are often missed by siloed metrics, as discussed in chapter 2.

6.2.1. Voice and participation in volunteer measurement during crises

Measuring volunteering using predefined measurement metrics, gathered through externally directed approaches, can be important for comparison. However, in a situation when crises overlap and interact and when their effects are compounded, standard metrics in isolation can limit opportunities for measuring the complex and interconnected nature of volunteering.[262] They can also miss less visible and context-specific aspects of volunteering, such as informal support and spontaneous responses.

Involving volunteers and crisis-affected communities in the measurement process can help improve the quality of the data that is collected. Participatory, narrative and community-led approaches focus on the voices of those closest to the impacts of crises and those are responding on the front-line. Existing inequalities can be exacerbated during crises. This means that participatory approaches are particularly relevant as they can help ensure measurement approaches include often excluded groups and their interests. Such approaches also provide space where volunteers and communities can reflect on and communicate the interconnected nature of their work at the local level, revealing adaptive, innovative and context-specific responses as well as the hidden impacts of volunteering. This can contribute to a deeper understanding of what volunteering means for individuals and communities, why people do it and the risks it can entail (see chapter 2).

Combining participatory strategies – such as diaries, mapping and embedded observation over time – can also help capture crucial and widespread informal forms of action in crises along with the networks and interconnections that underpin these responses. In Bangladesh, local youth-led organizations have used participatory methods such as digital storytelling, community testimonials and community-led assessments to measure volunteering during health emergencies and disasters (see Case Study Box 6.2). This has generated knowledge about the societal impact of volunteering across crises and the emotional impact on community-based volunteers.

Participatory approaches can also add greater transparency to the measurement process. During times of crises, such approaches can guard against the misuse of volunteer data. They can enable volunteers to define the terms and scope of measurement activities, while also identifying and selecting suitable methods and collecting and interpreting data themselves. For example, research into youth refugee volunteering in Uganda took a co-design approach to designing research tools. Young refugees helped to define how volunteering was included in the research and reviewed survey tools, allowing for local understanding and practices of volunteering to emerge which would not otherwise have been captured.[264]

Bottom-up approaches to measurement are particularly important in the context of the localization of humanitarian responses to crises. They mean that more comprehensive information about the different ways in which

Box 6.2. Measuring the impact of volunteers in response to multiple crises in Bangladesh [263]

In Bangladesh, local youth-led data collection has played a key role in tracking volunteer efforts, particularly during health emergencies and recurring floods. One such innovative approach is the use of digital storytelling to measure impact, inspired by the surge in local volunteering during COVID-19. Through digital portfolios, volunteers from the Aim Initiative Foundation document and share their experiences. By analysing these personal, qualitative narratives, the organization gains insight into the emotional and societal impact of community-based volunteers. This includes information on how volunteering supports well-being, improves community bonds and encourages a sense of identity and purpose amid crises. This narrative-based approach also captures the hope and positivity generated by volunteer action, with stories shared online to inspire wider engagement in Bangladesh and beyond.

Another measurement approach adopted in the country has involved community-led impact assessments in flood-affected districts, particularly in Feni, Comilla, Noakhali and Chittagong – areas that were severely affected by flooding in 2024. Here, young volunteers from the Service for Human Being Organisation (SHBO) played an active role in distributing food, medical care and community rehabilitation in a context of widespread displacement. In the absence of data-collection mechanisms to measure volunteer contributions, particularly that of spontaneous volunteers, SHBO introduced community testimonials and participatory assessment, gathering qualitative evidence directly from residents to assess the effectiveness of volunteer support. These insights have enabled the organization to adjust its strategies in real time and advocate for stronger national recognition of volunteer contributions.

These examples show that measuring the impact of volunteers during crisis situations requires flexible, locally grounded methods that can capture tangible outcomes and personal experiences of both formal and informal volunteers in close collaboration with the affected communities.

A scout moderates a dialogue on youth leadership at the 16th World Scout Moot 2025 in Porto, Portugal. *Credit: is Pablo Cuadra Caro, World Scouting*

crises emerge and compound can be gathered by the individuals directly affected by them. This helps to make connections between different aspects of crises and responses to them, helping coordination and avoiding situations where interventions may indeed counteract one another.

6.2.2. Measuring volunteering and social cohesion

Overlapping crises can create division in communities through displacement, mistrust and competition for scarce resources. Volunteers play important roles in promoting social cohesion [265] and encouraging solidarity, by acting as links within communities as well as with wider actors and institutions. This bridging role may be less visible in conventional volunteer data but is essential in enabling a crisis response and navigating what is often a fractured context. In Rwanda, high rates of community dispute resolution by Abunzi volunteer mediators show how community-based volunteering can strengthen social cohesion and prevent conflict escalation, crucial for navigating multiple overlapping crises. [266]

Mixed-methods approaches can help paint a picture of how volunteering builds social cohesion in crisis contexts. An evaluation measuring the impact of inter-community volunteering activities involving young Lebanese and Syrian refugees, adopted a before-and-after comparison approach, combining surveys with focus groups, interviews and 'most significant change' stories. The findings show that even short-term voluntary engagement, particularly when built around shared goals and combined with soft skills training, can significantly reduce tension, strengthen social cohesion and build trust between refugee and local host communities.[267] This has informed youth inclusion policies in Lebanon, affecting both Lebanese and Syrian young refugees in the country. In Indonesia, community testimonials and survey data on the role of volunteers in disaster management revealed a heightened sense of community resilience as a result of volunteers' efforts.[268] In the UK, studies combining surveys with interviews have allowed researchers to measure how local volunteering through mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic fostered a sense of unity, while mixed-methods evidence from Slovakia indicates that volunteering and levels of general trust and social cohesion are mutually reinforcing (see Case Study Box 6.3).

It is also particularly important to contextualize measurement approaches and tools to analyse social cohesion. In Ecuador, a mixed-methods study analysed the volunteering ecosystem – using territorial criteria to illustrate practices, and examined the 2016 earthquake and COVID-19 crises alongside stakeholder perceptions that volunteering fosters social cohesion.[270] The study developed the idea of 'possible volunteering' which acknowledged structural barriers and opportunities to participation, with implications for social cohesion. This recognized the distinctive socioeconomic features, histories and community dynamics of districts, ensuring that volunteering was measured in ways that reflected local conditions.

6.2.3. Assessing the dual roles of volunteers in response to crises

In crisis situations, volunteers often wear multiple hats. They provide support while simultaneously belonging to the same communities and contexts in which they work. They may even be recipients of aid themselves. This

Box 6.3. Measuring the social and relational dynamics of volunteering in times of crisis[269]

Recent studies show that measuring the social and psychological dimensions of volunteering can enhance its impact on individuals and society and help to create better infrastructures to support volunteers during times of crisis.

In Slovakia, a survey of 1,020 adults was conducted by Matej Bel University, supported by the Ministry of Education and the Platform of Volunteer Centres and Organizations. It measured formal and informal volunteering, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The survey assessed volunteering frequency, type and context, as well as social variables such as trust and community affiliation. Treating these as both the causes and consequences of volunteering enabled the research to adopt a bidirectional model of measurement. This revealed that trust motivates volunteering, which in turn strengthens social bonds, particularly through informal crisis-driven activities. The study also observed an increase in informal volunteering during crises, providing evidence for organizations to prioritize community-based initiatives and sustain volunteer engagement during periods of disruption.

In the UK, Heriot-Watt University employed a mixed-methods approach combining surveys (e.g. frequency, hours) with interviews to explore volunteering activities in relation to social identity. Using a social identity approach to volunteering, with both qualitative and quantitative measurement models, this research showed that volunteering behaviour is associated with improved well-being and mental health. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, local volunteering led to a sense of unity, which helped reduce anxiety among volunteers. This informed consultations with the government and enabled organizations to develop identity-focused strategies to enhance volunteer programme effectiveness in response to crises.

These approaches reveal the importance of considering the relational and psychological dimensions of volunteering to understand how its value to individuals and society can be amplified. Measuring the frequency of formal and informal volunteering alongside social factors such as trust and identity allows interest groups to see how these elements can reinforce each other and strengthen community resilience during times of crisis.

Box 6.4. Measuring volunteering among young refugees in Uganda

In contexts of displacement, volunteering rarely takes place in isolation. Instead, it is often deeply interwoven with the challenges of daily life for young refugees. The measurement outcomes of the Refugee Youth Volunteering Uganda project are multidimensional, and were achieved through a combination of quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews and visual photovoice data.[274]

Crucially, the measurement process did not begin with a questionnaire. The team first worked collaboratively to build the right infrastructure. Advisory Boards made up of young refugees helped develop the definition of volunteering. They were also involved in reviewing the survey questionnaire during its pilot stage. Interviews with key representatives from humanitarian and development organizations, as well as the local government, helped to further clarify how volunteering is understood in practice rather than assuming an understanding based on international experiences.

These processes ensured that the survey tool could capture the experiences of displaced populations that might otherwise have been overlooked. Following this co-design process, the survey data revealed that 70 per cent of the 3,053 respondents – all of whom were young refugees – reported having participated in some form of volunteering.

The evidence shows not only how many individuals volunteered in rural and urban areas, but also how volunteering intersects with key dimensions of young refugees' experiences, mainly:

- *Skills:* Volunteering offers pathways to skills development: 40 per cent of young people volunteered in order to learn or gain new skills, while 26 per cent did so to maintain existing ones. However, qualitative data shows that access to opportunities often depends on certain skill sets (e.g. language proficiency).
- *Mobility:* 72 per cent of young people volunteered predominantly in their own villages and qualitative data also highlighted that access to volunteering opportunities is shaped by mobility constraints.
- *Livelihoods:* In the context of displacement, volunteering is particularly embedded in the struggle to survive and generate income, with 'getting money' featuring as a key motivation for 33 per cent of current volunteers.
- *Multiple motivations:* 73 per cent of survey respondents selected more than one motivation for volunteering, reflecting the need to go beyond 'one-size-fits-all' explanations. Of note was the desire to build social connections (e.g. volunteering to help the community and make friends).

can shape their understanding of local needs as well as their motivations, but it can also pose challenges for measurement strategies. For example, when refugees volunteer in humanitarian responses,[271] their dual 'refugee-volunteer' status[272] can render them invisible in reporting. Successfully engaging with these aspects of volunteer identity in measurement approaches can provide data to ensure that volunteer support is tailored to their contributions and needs.

In Uganda, a study focused on the volunteer experiences of young refugees from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Somalia. It explored not only what volunteering meant to young people, but also how it connected to livelihoods, mobility and identity, as discussed earlier.[273] In contemporary crises, where displaced populations are often portrayed solely as passive aid recipients, this approach challenges measurement assumptions. It shows how young refugees actively engage in volunteering, responding to crises while at the same time shaping their roles in ways that reflect their identities (see Case Study Box 6.4).

When it comes to assessing the dual roles of volunteers in response to crises, issues of safety, security and well-being are particularly important. During the Mount Sinabung volcanic eruptions in Indonesia, volunteers mobilized quickly amid overlapping environmental hazards, displacement and

Yubin Cho, UNICEF Ghana's Child Protection Junior Officer, fights child labour and empowers youth through innovative, gender-sensitive approaches, supporting Ghana's Accelerated Action Plan (2027–2023) with KOICA-funded initiatives. *Credit: UNV 2024*

economic hardship.[275] Their efforts have been recognized as an important part of the community response, but their exposure to toxic ash without proper protective gear recalls the serious risks they face as both responders and community members.[276] Volunteer safety standards such as those developed by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) provide frameworks for assessing whether volunteers are adequately protected, offering an indirect means of measurement.[277]

6.2.4. Measuring volunteering over time during crises and beyond

Volunteers play continuous roles in and between crises, responding to everyday stresses as well as mobilizing at key moments before, during and after specific emergencies, whether these be acute or slow onset in nature. For example, in the context of voluntary action on climate change, where environmental, social and economic pressures intersect and evolve over time, volunteers engage in overlapping activities across different time frames (see Case Study Box 6.5). Measuring such contributions involves paying attention to how volunteering may change over time as people's capacities, roles and motivations shift. The cumulative impacts of crises on community resilience and individual well-being may impact patterns of engagement. Less visible forms of volunteering and their impacts may only be revealed in the long term. Routine monitoring and evaluation which focuses on specific periods or moments in time can miss some of this valuable information. Adapting measurement approaches to consider and include longitudinal metrics can help highlight and deepen understanding of both individual and community impacts and inform more responsive interventions.

Box 6.5. Measuring the contribution of volunteerism to climate action and community resilience

A 2024 study published by UNV[278] has identified four main ways in which volunteering contributes to climate action and community resilience over time:

- *Knowledge and capacity-building:* Volunteers and volunteer organizations work as trainers, learners, educators and sharers of knowledge.
- *Disaster preparedness and response:* Volunteers act as first responders during disasters and extreme weather events.
- *Mitigation and adaptation implementation:* Volunteers help carry out national climate plans by carrying out mitigation and adaptation actions.
- *Climate governance:* Volunteers engage actively in shaping and participating in climate policy.

In addition to these areas, gender equity and youth-led climate action were identified as themes connected to all issues, as volunteers promote climate justice through gender equity and youth leadership. This study recommended continued measurement and reporting of volunteer contributions to climate action and community resilience to inform national and global planning.

Measuring volunteering during crisis situations needs to be sensitive to differences in civic space between countries and for different volunteers.

Milagros Assuero, UN Volunteer Specialist at the IOM AMOR Center, and her colleagues distribute food, hygiene kits, and vital information to migrants and refugees on major avenues in Quito, Ecuador. *Credit: UNV 2022.*

Longitudinal perspectives can be integrated into quantitative and qualitative approaches such as through surveys or time use diaries, or ethnographic techniques including oral histories and narrative interviews which can explore changing motivations, experiences and impacts over time. Since 2019, an ongoing eight-year longitudinal study has tracked Australian volunteers to analyse how international volunteering shapes personal, professional and civic outcomes over time.[279] Volunteers are followed before, during and after their placements in different countries through multiple waves of in-depth qualitative interviews, with findings later tested in a large-scale survey to capture both individual trajectories and wider trends.[280] This revealed new knowledge about the substantial informal support that volunteers continue to provide to partner organizations after their placements. A significant proportion of volunteers in the study have also transitioned into prosocial careers, revealing a long-term developmental impact of volunteering beyond discrete short-term crisis response tasks. This reveals an often-overlooked long-term impact of international development assistance funding for volunteer programmes.[281]

6.3. The challenges and opportunities of volunteer measurement during times of crisis

When multiple crises overlap, this can pose a challenge for volunteer measurement, creating numerous needs that require different responses. Volunteer roles range from immediate crisis response and disaster risk reduction to longer-term work such as community care, environmental protection, advocacy and awareness-raising.[282] Volunteers may switch roles or take on multiple roles depending on emerging needs. The diversity of these roles, and how they can overlap, make it challenging to measure who is doing what and to identify the specific contributions of volunteers, particularly when they work alongside others.

These challenges are amplified by the low visibility of certain groups and activities. During crises, the contributions of women, young people, migrants and ethnic minorities are often at the forefront of community care and mutual aid. However, existing measurement approaches tend to primarily capture the actions of more visible contributors, meaning the voluntary efforts of marginalized groups can be hidden. This not only

misrepresents how individuals and communities mobilize in this context, but also risks those groups being excluded from decision-making.

Combining tools that balance comparability and sensitivity to local variations opens opportunities for new measurement strategies. Participatory research on volunteering in the Indian Sundarbans, mentioned earlier,[283] enabled participants, particularly women, to document the impacts of their activities in their own communities through their own photographs and diaries. This identified how volunteering not only contributes to climate adaptation but also amplifies women's voices and livelihood opportunities. This approach to measurement was able to capture information about how volunteering reaches beyond climate action to address long-standing social challenges.

However, efforts to make these hidden forms of volunteering visible can bring additional complexities and unintended consequences. Expanding measurement to include informal, solidaristic or politically sensitive forms of voluntary action, risks exposing individuals and groups to unwanted attention or scrutiny, potentially undermining forms of collective action that are seen as more political. It could also increase expectations of unpaid labour for 'service delivery' if data reveals capacities for voluntary work. There is a risk that data could be used to justify the withdrawal of support or resources, worsening the effects of the crisis. Measuring volunteering during crisis situations needs to be sensitive to differences in civic space between countries and for different volunteers. Efforts to capture information about volunteering must acknowledge and mitigate the risks that data can produce in some contexts, including when integrating the experiences and practices of volunteers themselves and grounding these in local economic, social and political realities[284] (see also chapter 2).

The conditions which arise during multiple and overlapping crises can also undermine the systems needed to measure volunteering, with weakened infrastructure and institutions limiting capacity for data collection.[285] This can be hard to overcome without undermining the safety, security and well-being of participants and researchers by cutting corners in relation to issues such as ethics and data management. Reviewing existing measurement activities in development and humanitarian initiatives can provide evidence on volunteering and avoid unnecessary duplication and risk. Close collaboration with local partners, and awareness of the context in which volunteers are operating, becomes even more significant when multiple crises occur, as evidenced in Bangladesh (see Case Study Box 6.2 earlier in this chapter).

While crisis conditions impose limits, they can also present opportunities to drive innovation based on local insight.[286] Crisis situations push measurement to account for the complexity of volunteer roles, impacts, overlaps and interconnections, as well as how power relations – specifically whose contributions are visible and valued – shape volunteering. Developing more locally grounded approaches to measurement, ensuring the experiences of marginalized groups and forms of volunteering are captured, addressing the risks of measurement and integrating volunteer measurement with other data sources, are all important lessons for volunteer measurement more broadly.

Developing relevant measurement is not just about producing more data. It is about improving recognition, strengthening solidarity and informing more integrated and just responses to crisis situations. Responsive and adaptive approaches can shift measurement from top-down delivery models towards strategies that reflect the many ways volunteers themselves respond to crises. In this way, measurement itself can become part of resilience building, rethinking development, crisis governance and civic action.

Box 6.6. Principles of volunteer measurement during multiple overlapping crises

1. Capture how volunteering changes over time and in response to the dynamics of multiple and overlapping crises, from everyday stresses to slow developing and acute situations
2. Adapt what is being measured as conditions evolve, reflecting changing contexts, pressures and needs, and the changing activities of volunteers to meet those needs
3. Situate volunteering in its broader context including political, social and economic factors such as local norms, relationships, governance structures, economic systems and citizens' roles and responsibilities
4. Recognize informal, every day and networked activities, including less visible or marginalized forms of volunteering which are often at the forefront of crisis response
5. Track both immediate responses to crises, as well as longer-term contributions to social cohesion and resilience
6. Account for the risks and vulnerabilities volunteers face, particularly for volunteers operating in prolonged or overlapping crises

6.4. Conclusion

Volunteering lies at the heart of how communities navigate the multiple and interlocking crises affecting the world today. It connects individuals, communities and institutions across formal structures and informal networks. It is fluid and evolving, often emerging to address systemic gaps, contributing to relief as well as social cohesion, community resilience and peace. Volunteering during crises includes but goes beyond the immediate response efforts, generating new, multifaceted opportunities for promoting peace and development.

This chapter has shown why measuring volunteering during times of crisis is important, and the reasons why it is also challenging. Effective measurement can show how volunteering may evolve, the different ways people contribute, the networks that support it, whose efforts are recognized or ignored, and how volunteers themselves are impacted. It can also generate information about how crises unfold and interact.

The complex and compounding conditions that arise when crises overlap requires a combination of strategies to effectively measure volunteer efforts across multiple and intersecting challenges. This chapter has highlighted tools and methods that can help capture this information, through participatory, adaptive and context-sensitive approaches developed collaboratively by governments, organizations, researchers and communities. The principles for measurement to remain relevant and effective at a time when the world is seeing multiple simultaneous crises are set out below (see Box 6.6).

International UN Youth Volunteer Seshiru Muraki is a Project Support Assistant serving with IOM in Madagascar.
Credit: UNV 2023

7 THE GLOBAL INDEX OF VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT (GIVE)

Key messages

- **A holistic metric is needed to assess the impact of volunteering.** Numerical measurement such as that based on time and money, does not capture their full value. The Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE) measures the contribution of volunteering on people, communities and economies.
- **The GIVE is built on four core, equally weighted dimensions:** individual value, societal value, economic value and an environment that promotes volunteerism, which in turn reinforces that environment.
- **Data gaps persist.** Volunteer data is incomplete and inconsistent, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Different definitions make comparisons difficult. The GIVE framework is designed to mitigate this through a rigorous selection of indicators and data harmonization, although it still requires qualitative assessment.
- **The GIVE is a practical and flexible tool for action.** It uses simple equal weight scoring and flexible indicators to fit national contexts. The GIVE aims to guide policy and encourage civic participation in development.

7.1. Introduction

As has been seen in the preceding chapters of this Report, to truly appreciate the significance of volunteering, it must be viewed holistically and recognized not just by the number of volunteers and hours contributed, but as a complex, multidimensional concept shaped by interconnected personal, community, economic and contextual factors. Effective strategies to address these diverse elements are crucial for promoting and managing volunteering to maximize its benefits and positive human impact.

This Report estimates that 34.5 per cent of working-age people around the world (some 2.1 billion individuals) currently engage in volunteer work every month (see chapter 3). These volunteers contribute to addressing major global challenges, such as poverty, hunger and inequality, particularly in the Global South.[287] Just as volunteering contributed to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs),[288] it is now widely seen as a crucial component for reaching the SDGs.[289] Such global recognition affirms volunteering as a key strategic asset, reinforcing the need to leverage its full potential.

The significance of volunteering for social development is widely acknowledged. However, a notable gap persists in the development sector regarding a comprehensive and standardized measure that captures its multidimensional scope, providing substantial benefits for individuals, communities and economies. Unlike established composite indices, such as the Human Development Index (HDI)[290] and the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI),[291] which offer holistic assessments of human and social development and consider vital factors beyond income or consumption patterns (see also chapter 5), no equivalent framework exists to capture the multidimensional contributions of volunteering. An overreliance on metrics focused on the numbers of volunteers and hours served, as discussed earlier in this Report, has led to the undervaluation of volunteerism, the true value of volunteers and the networks that engage them.

To fill this gap, in the early 2000s UNV, in collaboration with the ILO and several other partners, led and championed initiatives to create standard tools for national data collection. The concept of a universal volunteering measuring framework was adopted to guide the generation of timely, reliable and standardized volunteering data.

This chapter outlines a framework for constructing the GIVE, a crucial step in measuring volunteering using standardized tools and methodologies which will make it easier to compare data around the world. The proposed GIVE is a standardized, multidimensional composite index designed to capture and promote the contributions of volunteering worldwide. By providing a comprehensive metric, the GIVE will serve as a powerful advocacy tool to guide policy, inform investment in the volunteering sector

and encourage greater citizen engagement in development. The data generated from the GIVE will contribute to measuring the contribution of volunteering on various development sectors and will serve as a resource for implementing sustainable development.

The GIVE framework goes beyond numerical metrics related to volunteering, such as the number of volunteers, the hours they donate or the monetary value of their work – metrics which directly relate to the act of volunteering itself. Instead, its holistic perspective is rooted in the outcomes achieved through volunteering, demonstrating that volunteering has a significant impact on individuals, communities and society. This responds to a need for multidimensional approaches to measurement, as set out in previous chapters. The GIVE aims to enhance understanding of the real value of volunteering and its role in fostering sustainable development, social progress and overall well-being.

7.2. Definition and key concepts of volunteering

The GIVE uses the definition of volunteering adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2001 (Resolution A/RES/56/38) as: "a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor."[292] Taking a broader approach than that used in the global estimates of volunteer work presented in chapter 3, this definition encompasses a wider range of activities, including traditional mutual aid, self-help efforts, civic engagement and organized service delivery among others.

René Ifono, WHO communications officer in CAR, supports a community mobiliser in raising awareness and mobilising the community against the measles epidemic in the Niakari market, Bangassou. *Credit: UNV 2023*

7.3. The scope of the GIVE

The GIVE was conceived as a multidimensional measure of volunteering, emphasizing the well-being, life satisfaction and social benefits it brings to individuals and communities. After extensive research and engagement with stakeholders – including academics, the United Nations, intergovernmental organizations and representatives from voluntary and civil society organizations – the GIVE incorporates diverse perspectives, making it a resilient tool for assessing the socioeconomic benefits of volunteering at the individual, community and economic levels. These benefits are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing.[293] Volunteering creates interlinked benefits at all levels, but the extent of these benefits is determined by the environment in which volunteering takes place.[294] To measure these aspects of volunteering, the GIVE consists of four dimensions:

1. The unique value volunteering offers to individuals, promoting their personal growth and fulfilment (Value to the Individual)

2. The contributions volunteering makes to communities and societies, strengthening connections and resilience (Value to the Community)
3. The economic value of volunteering, demonstrating its contribution to local and national economies (Value to the Economy)
4. The importance of fostering an environment that supports and gives power to volunteers (Enabling Environment).

7.4. The GIVE indicators

The GIVE uses key indicators to measure the direct and indirect benefits of volunteering. This includes its effects on individual well-being, community welfare and the economy.

7.4.1 Indicators of the value of volunteering to the individual

As explored in chapter 4 of this Report, volunteering contributes to individual well-being, fostering personal growth, developing skills, creating economic opportunities and enhancing overall life satisfaction. For instance, research has linked it to health benefits, including lower mortality rates, improved physical functioning and better management of illnesses.[295] It can also boost self-esteem, self-efficacy and mental health, thereby enhancing resilience throughout a person's life. Furthermore, structured volunteering has been linked to higher psychological well-being, fewer depressive symptoms and a better quality of life.[296]

7.4.2 Indicators of the value of volunteering to communities and societies

Volunteering is a key driver of social cohesion, civic participation and effective service delivery, making substantial contributions to communities and society, as discussed in chapter 5 of this Report. Research indicates that volunteering promotes social bonds, fosters trust and reduces loneliness, thereby enhancing community resilience.[297] These impacts are especially evident during crises, where volunteers

Kasunjith Satanarachchi Devesurenda, UN Youth Volunteer with UNDP Sri Lanka engages with PWD partners. *Credit: UNV 2023*

enhance disaster preparedness, response and recovery, while promoting solidarity – see chapter 6. Volunteering also supports essential services, particularly in the healthcare sector, by enhancing patient experiences and helping to sustain health systems under pressure.[298] Additionally, it supports education, environmental protection and disaster response.[299] The GIVE captures this value by measuring how volunteering builds social capital and community resilience, demonstrating its role in fostering social connections and effective service delivery, particularly in times of need.

7.4.3 Indicators of the economic value of volunteering

Volunteering yields significant economic benefits for individuals, organizations and society as a whole. It constitutes a major component

The GIVE was conceived as a multidimensional measure of volunteering, emphasizing the well-being, life satisfaction and social benefits it brings to individuals and communities.

of the national labour supply and contributes to the overall economy by reducing service delivery costs.[300] As analysed in chapter 5 of this Report, key indicators include the number of volunteer hours and their replacement cost, reductions in nonprofit operational expenses, contributions to local businesses and the broader enhancement of social capital and community cohesion.[301] Volunteer programmes can also support job creation, skills development and workforce readiness. For example, experimental evidence suggests that participation in volunteering increases the likelihood of securing paid employment.[302] Volunteering may also support innovation and social entrepreneurship.[303]

7.4.4 Indicators of an enabling environment

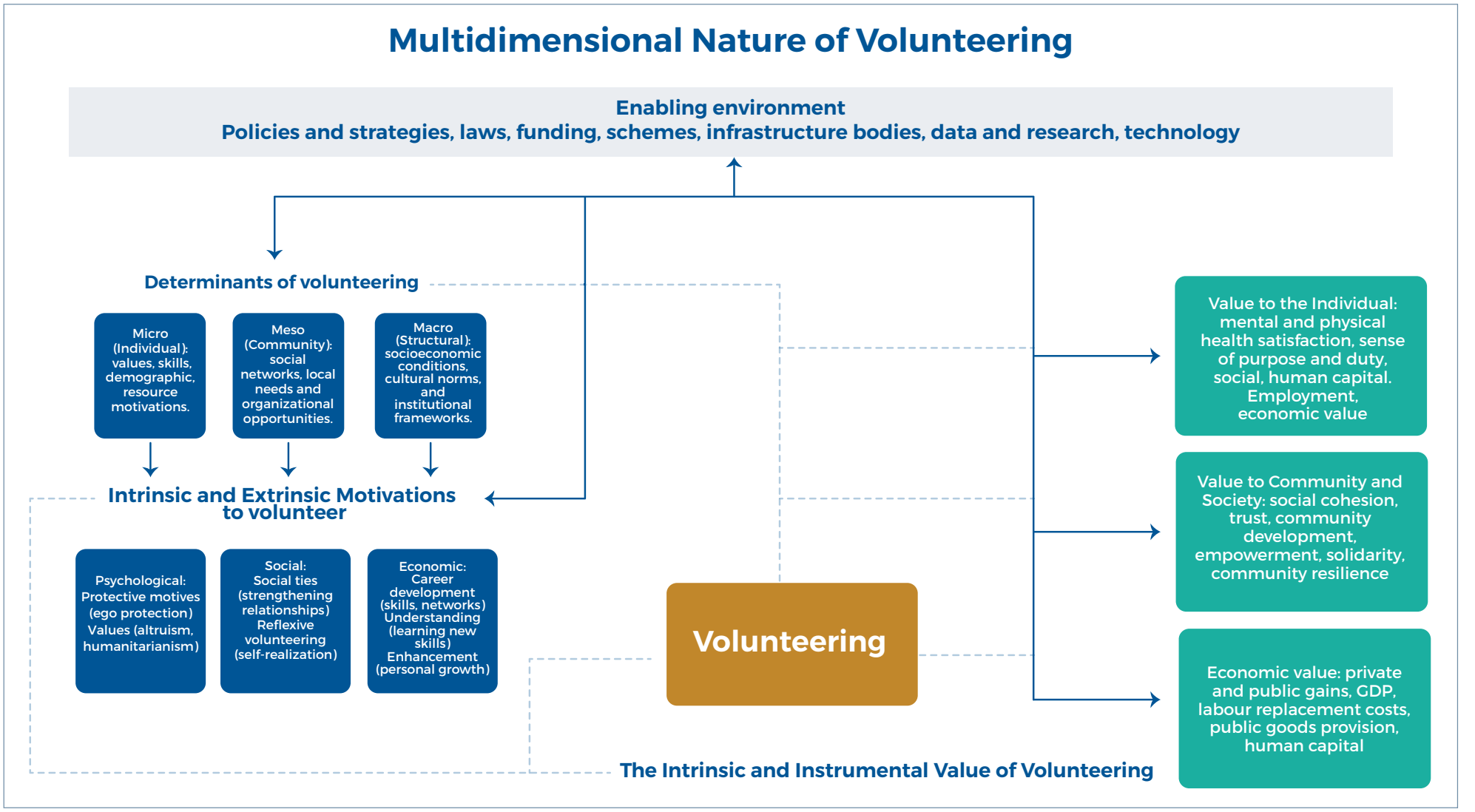
The environment in which volunteering takes place plays a crucial role in enhancing volunteering across various sectors, ensuring that its benefits extend beyond individual gains to positively impact labour markets. An enabling environment can help integrate community efforts into broader development agendas, making economic contributions visible within national frameworks. The Plan of Action to incorporate volunteering into the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes the need to systematically embed volunteering into national strategies, supported by measurement systems that demonstrate its economic and social impact.[304] Successful integration relies on political, legal, institutional and cultural support, making clear definitions and supportive legislation essential. Effective laws and policies on volunteering can eliminate barriers, encourage citizen participation and encourage the growth of volunteering within a country.[305]

This section highlights the essential factors that create an enabling environment which is conducive to creating a flourishing volunteering sector, including:

- Policy and strategic integration: Embedding volunteering into the SDG and national development frameworks; systematically measuring contributions
- Legal and regulatory environment: Laws that protect volunteers and ensure ethical practices, while protecting them from exploitation
- Sustainable infrastructure and resources: Volunteer centres, digital platforms, awareness campaigns and transparent funding systems
- Organizational and management practices: Strong leadership, defined roles, professional volunteer management and strategic integration
- Incentives and recognition: Non-financial rewards, flexible recruitment and reimbursement schemes
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships: Strong cooperation between government, civil society and private sector actors
- Data and accountability: Research, impact measurement and transparent reporting of case studies, such as those provided in Appendix C, reveal a clear divergence between the Global North and Global South.

In countries such as Canada, Norway and the United Kingdom, volunteering frameworks are primarily designed to remove legal barriers, institutionalize the volunteer infrastructure and expand civic participation. These environments are sustained by long-term state funding and grant systems, reflecting a strong tradition of welfare. In contrast, in contexts such as South Africa and Kenya, volunteerism policies often emerge in response to urgent development challenges such as HIV/AIDS, youth unemployment and

Figure 7.1. Multidimensional Nature of Volunteering



post-conflict reconstruction. In these settings, funding tends to rely more heavily on donors, international agencies and NGOs, with governments playing a facilitating rather than a central role.

Another key distinction is between state-led and civil-society-led models of volunteering governance. China and India represent strongly state-led models, where governments use centralized agencies to mobilize volunteers for national priorities. In contrast, countries such as Brazil, Mexico and Lebanon showcase civil society-driven advocacy, where grassroots campaigns push for national volunteer laws. Evidence from Africa, particularly South Africa and Kenya, demonstrates hybrid approaches where traditional practices along with modern practices shape volunteering, alongside selective state policies. These findings

highlight the fact that environments which are conducive to volunteering require not only formal legislation but also sustained funding, institutional collaboration and cultural alignment with how society already engages in collective action.

In conclusion, the benefits of volunteering at the individual, community and economic levels are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. However, they rely on the presence of an enabling environment that legitimizes, protects and promotes volunteering. Strengthening this environment – through inclusive policies, legal frameworks, institutional support and recognition mechanisms – ensures that volunteering can not only thrive but also make meaningful contributions to sustainable development and social transformation. The interconnections between the four GIVE dimensions are illustrated in Figure 7.1.

Figure 7.1 illustrates volunteering as a complex, dynamic system. Its dimensions are deeply interrelated through a series of bidirectional influences facilitated by an enabling environment of policies, laws, funding and infrastructure. This enabling environment is not a passive backdrop, it is an active force that can either enable or constrain volunteering. The framework demonstrates that the value created by volunteering, including its demonstrated economic value, generates a powerful feedback loop. This value provides a clear rationale for continued funding and supportive policies, which in turn reinforce people's motivation to volunteer. This creates a virtuous cycle where a robust, enabling environment cultivates volunteerism, which then produces tangible value that secures and strengthens the very environment that made it possible. This highlights the deeply interconnected and self-sustaining nature of the system.

7.5. Methodology for constructing the GIVE

Similar to other well-known global indices, there were several key steps in developing and calculating this multidimensional volunteer index. The GIVE, as proposed, assesses volunteering across the four dimensions: Value to the Individual, Value to the Community, Value to the Economy and the Enabling Environment, using a range of indicators. First, the indicators are brought onto the same scale, ranging from 0 to 100. Second,

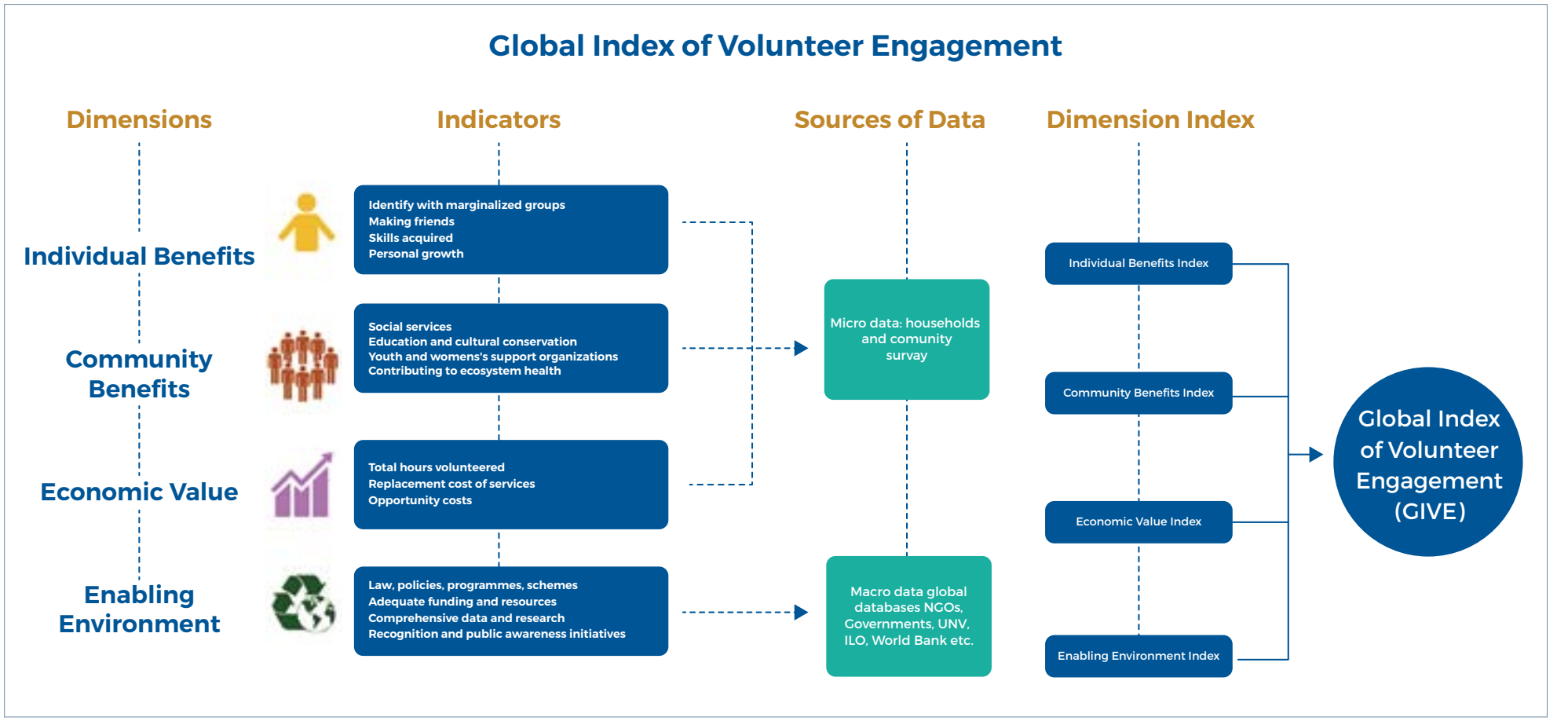
Saad Bou Chahine, national UN Volunteer with UNICEF, monitoring activities of increasing youth employability in Kab Elias, Bekaa, Lebanon. *Credit: UNV 2023*

the indicators within each dimension are combined by calculating the arithmetic mean, followed by applying the geometric mean across the four dimensions which is computed as the resulting GIVE score for each country, ranging from 0 to 100. Higher values indicate a more positive outlook on volunteering. For more detailed information and examples, please refer to the attached technical note in Appendix C.

7.5.1 Sources of volunteering data

A comprehensive data source mapping exercise was undertaken to examine the global landscape of volunteering data, drawing on international, regional and national surveys, reports and statistics that capture different aspects of volunteer activity. Prominent among these are global household surveys, such as the World Values Surveys, Global Barometer Surveys, the European and Western Generational Social Survey, the World Giving Index surveys, Time Use Surveys, ILO Volunteer Activity Surveys and country-specific household surveys. They provide

Figure 7.2. The Global Index of Volunteer Engagement



differing definitions and coverage of variables and indicators related to volunteering and the frequency of survey exercises vary. Together, these sources offered broad insights into volunteering, spanning participation rates, motivations, civic and political engagement, enabling conditions and the economic and social value of volunteer contributions. However, the data mapping exercise also revealed a significant challenge in that there is a lack of a common methodology and harmonized data across sources, which complicates global level comparisons.

Despite these challenges, the mapping exercise offered a valuable baseline for future standardization, indicating where existing data frameworks could be aligned and where new approaches are needed to promote inclusivity and comparability. A comprehensive data matrix report, which includes detailed information about the various data sources and the corresponding volunteering variables, is available upon request from UNV.

7.5.2 Differences in context and variables

Differences in variable types across surveys are particularly significant. For instance, in the World Values Survey, all participants who volunteered were asked to respond to a set of 14 questions, each rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important).

A comprehensive data source mapping exercise was undertaken to examine the global landscape of volunteering data, drawing on international, regional and national surveys, reports and statistics that capture different aspects of volunteer activity.

Sample indicators from this survey include helping those in need, contributing to society, enhancing one's skills and expanding one›s social network. For South Africa, in the implementation of the Volunteer Activity Survey, response options included helping a cause the volunteer believes in, volunteering because friends do, gaining skills and work experience, fulfilling religious obligations, exploring personal strengths, using skills and experiences and volunteering due to personal experience with the cause supported by the organization.[306]

Similarly, Social Surveys Africa focuses on the reasons for volunteering, capturing motivations, social drivers and personal benefits.[307] Other surveys, such as the Time Well Spent Survey, concentrate on aspects such as satisfaction, barriers to volunteering and retention, generating variables related to perceived personal benefits and the inclusiveness of volunteering opportunities.[308] Additionally, the UNV Global Volunteer Survey records organizational and contextual indicators, such as volunteer management practices and environments which are conducive to volunteering.

7.5.3 Identifying and extracting indicator variables to construct the GIVE

The data selection and collection process for the GIVE involved analysis and input from stakeholders across various regions. Consultations were held from the start to identify dimensions and indicators. Participants included volunteer practitioners, statisticians and index developers from United Nations agencies, academics and regional groups including Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and the Arab States. These initial talks confirmed support for creating a volunteering index that would provide a global measurement tool and statistics. They also clarified several conceptual variables and dimensions, as well as methodological, statistical and data aspects.

To illustrate the computational method behind the GIVE, two hybrid synthetic datasets were created combining real-world and artificial data. The GIVE framework, comprising four key dimensions, is illustrated in figure 7.2. To enhance the methodologies for weighting and aggregation, detailed discussions took place with statisticians from the African Development Bank and academia. This helped inform the selection and weighting of indicators based on case studies and results. The definitions and concepts related to these four dimensions are explained in section 7.2 above, highlighting the various challenges and complexities associated with them.

7.5.4 Robustness check

This chapter's analysis of multidimensional volunteerism was supported by several decisions regarding the weighting and aggregation approaches, as well as the scale on which the indicators are based. These were intended to verify the consistency, robustness and all other elements of the index by subpopulation. Sensitivity analyses to assess the impact of item selections, indicator scaling and weighting schemes on outcomes were carried out, including other continuous and categorical scales, as well as additive and multiplicative methods. These checks confirm that the findings remain valid across various analytical frameworks. For a complete review of the results, see the detailed section in the technical note in Appendix C.

7.6. Conclusion

This chapter proposes a framework for a composite index on volunteering, aimed at quantifying and analysing volunteer engagement worldwide. The research indicates that a straightforward weighted additive aggregation method is likely to be the most effective approach, as it minimizes information loss while aligning with theoretical insights derived from earlier studies. The empirical findings substantiate the practicality of the index framework, demonstrating its capability to measure volunteer activities across diverse datasets. The framework is built on the assumption of equal weights in the aggregation process. Future research could investigate how adjusting these weights affects the relative importance of factors driving volunteerism

One primary conclusion of this framework is that numerical metrics, such as the hours contributed by volunteers and the replacement value associated with their work, do not capture the full breadth of the impact of volunteering. Instead, they represent just a subset of the myriad aspects and intrinsic values of volunteering, underscoring the importance of considering a broader range of evaluation dimensions.

The data landscape for volunteering, especially in low- and middle-income countries, is uneven and incomplete. High-quality, disaggregated data are often outdated and underused due to poor dissemination and a lack of open access. Inconsistent definitions of volunteering result in inadequate indicators, hindering international comparisons. Informal and digital volunteering is rarely captured and irregular data collection limits time series analysis. One key observation about the GIVE is that while it possesses construct validity, the underlying data from various surveys are not only inconsistent but fundamentally incomparable because the underlying concepts themselves are not aligned across the various instruments. This is a critical challenge for a global index. The GIVE framework attempts to mitigate this issue through a rigorous process of indicator selection and data harmonization. However, for a truly holistic evaluation, it must be combined with qualitative criteria, confirming the insights of the preceding chapters in this Report that show the importance of a multidimensional approach to measuring volunteering.

It is advisable to perform the GIVE calculations using comprehensive, high-quality household survey datasets, such as those provided by the ILO-VAS, Time Use Survey or similar large-scale surveys conducted across multiple countries that gather comparable data on volunteer activities through households rather than organizations. Countries without volunteer data should be assisted to conduct household surveys to evaluate the scope, characteristics and impact of volunteering worldwide – both formal (through organizations) and informal (direct help to individuals or communities) – through national bureaux of statistics to generate greater commitment and ownership of the data and the resulting GIVE.

Governments may find the GIVE to be a useful tool for better understanding and supporting the role of volunteers in accomplishing national objectives.

7.7 Recommendations on the implementation of the GIVE

The GIVE is a defining step in acknowledging the multifaceted benefits of volunteering to people, communities, economies and society as a whole. As a globally comparable but context-sensitive index, it should advance the understanding of volunteerism as a fundamental component of sustainable human development, encourage evidence-based policymaking and boost civic engagement. Essentially, GIVE should tell the story of how people everywhere help create communities that are stronger, more equitable and more cohesive, rather than just measuring volunteering. In accordance with stakeholder priorities, the following suggestions are made to guarantee its efficacy, adoption and sustainability.

7.7.1 Member States and policymakers

Governments may find the GIVE to be a useful tool for better understanding and supporting the role of volunteers in accomplishing national objectives. **To accomplish this, they should:**

- Include volunteering in national plans and statistics. Show how volunteering advances the SDGs and development priorities by using GIVE indicators
- Encourage data integration and capacity-building. Using ILO and UNV methodologies, assist national statistical offices in incorporating standardized volunteering modules into labour force or household surveys
- Contextually adjust indicators. Preserve global comparability while permitting the flexible addition of culturally pertinent aspects of volunteering, particularly for unofficial and community-based activities

7.7.2 United Nations entities and multilateral bodies

GIVE is a tool that United Nations agencies can use to emphasize the value of people's participation in development.

- Integrate GIVE into SDG reporting. Connect GIVE findings to demonstrate the ways in which volunteers and citizens support sustainable development.
- Encourage cooperation between agencies. Encourage United Nations agencies (such as UNDP, UN Women and the ILO) to collaborate in using GIVE metrics to guide advocacy and programming on inclusive civic engagement.
- Encourage technical coordination and guidance. Create a task force or technical group to advise nations and guarantee data harmonization, quality and comparability, technical standards and results distribution.

7.7.3 Academia and research institutions

In order to improve the GIVE framework and make sure it represents actual experiences, researchers are essential. **Researchers should:**

- Use methodological rigour. To guarantee scientific rigour and to improve scientific validity, keep testing the indicators, data sources, weighting techniques and normalization techniques.
- Support local research centres. Enhance university research capabilities in volunteering, especially in the Global South, by empowering them to co-lead data collection and contextual analyses of volunteerism.
- Encourage new research and innovation in measuring social value by making GIVE data and insights publicly available.

SVF Supports Volunteer Mobilization for COP16 in Cali, Colombia. *Credit: UNV 2024*

- Promote open data access. Make GIVE data and insights available to encourage new research and innovation in measuring social value.

7.7.4 Civil society and organizations involving volunteers

The index is centred on volunteer organizations and civil society. Its evolution must be shaped by their voices. **Volunteer organizations and civil society should:**

- Assure involvement and inclusivity. Involve grassroots and local organizations in gathering anecdotes and validating indicators that demonstrate the social impact of volunteering.
- Use the GIVE in advocacy work. Convert index results into easily understood visual aids that support the argument for increased funding and volunteer appreciation.
- Showcase the work of volunteers. Use the findings to guide improved systems for volunteer management, encouragement and recognition.

7.7.5 Stakeholders in corporate volunteering and the private sector

Corporate volunteering and the private sector have a role to play in implementing the GIVE. **The private sector should:**

- Include metrics related to corporate volunteering. Recognize how companies can encourage skills-based engagement, social responsibility and employee volunteerism.
- Connect with sustainability goals. Align GIVE indicators with environmental, social and governance reporting to demonstrate shared social impact.

7.7.6 Cross-cutting technical recommendations

Data inclusivity can be enhanced by expanding the measurement of digital, community and informal volunteering to include gender, age and diversity, particularly among women, young people and marginalized groups. **Everyone involved in using and implementing the GIVE should:**

- Be clear in their communication. To encourage public participation and policy adoption, create straightforward tools and visual dashboards that make GIVE results available to all, including country profiles.
- Continue to develop the GIVE. To make sure it stays current, transparent and flexible, schedule frequent reviews and stakeholder consultations to keep the index responsive to shifting realities.

7.8 The Next Step: implementing the GIVE

To advance the GIVE from its conceptual framework to an operational composite index a strategy will follow which will elaborate on how the framework can become a fully standardized, internationally comparable measure of volunteering across its four dimensions: impact on individuals,

impact on communities, the economic impact of volunteering, and the enabling environment. The strategy will harmonize global data sources, compute GIVE scores for countries and regions and disseminate findings through interactive, SDG-aligned platforms. **Its phased approach includes:**

1. Data compilation and quality assessment: Rigorous data quality assessments will evaluate completeness, consistency and comparability across countries and over time. Gaps and limitations will be documented, with proposed strategies to improve data coverage—such as integrating GIVE-related variables into existing national or regional household surveys. Discrepancies in national datasets will be addressed through verification against official sources, harmonization of indicators, metadata review, statistical adjustment, and validation by country-level experts, ensuring reliable and comparable data for the Index.
2. Index construction: This phase will involve the elaboration of the framework into a full-fledged index, the GIVE, based on available and selected datasets. This will include discussion of normalization, weighting, aggregation, reliability and pilot testing. A prototype GIVE Index will be computed for a subset of countries to assess validity and interpretability.
3. Validation, consultation and peer review of GIVE and dimension scores: Regional and global workshops will be conducted to present the GIVE and gather feedback, ensuring stakeholder engagement and policy relevance. This will be an iterative process to refine the GIVE Index.
4. Global reporting and dissemination: This will involve generating GIVE Index reports that compare countries and highlight thematic findings. The GIVE Index will be shared through regional and global platforms, including those of UNV, the United Nations and partner organisations, as well as during workshops. Work will be conducted with national partners to integrate the GIVE Index into volunteering and SDG reporting. The findings will be presented through interactive visualizations, maps, and dashboards to enhance accessibility and facilitate policy implementation.

Wang Caihong, National UN Volunteer Specialist, serving as Project Analyst with the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation (UNOSSC). *Credit: UNV 2025*

5. Institutionalization and sustainability: To ensure the long-term relevance of the GIVE Index, mechanisms for institutionalization will be established. A dedicated GIVE Technical Task Force under UNV will handle data maintenance, periodic updates and methodology reviews. The GIVE indicators will be integrated into global and national volunteer measurement systems and capacity will be strengthened within national statistical offices. Sustainability will be supported through ownership by international organizations, regular updates, transparent methodologies, an advisory network and integration into policy frameworks.

UNV collaborated with UNDP and letsdoitbih during the SDG Week BIH held between 9-13 October.
Credit: UNV 2023

8

MOVING FORWARD: WHAT'S NEXT FOR VOLUNTEER MEASUREMENT?

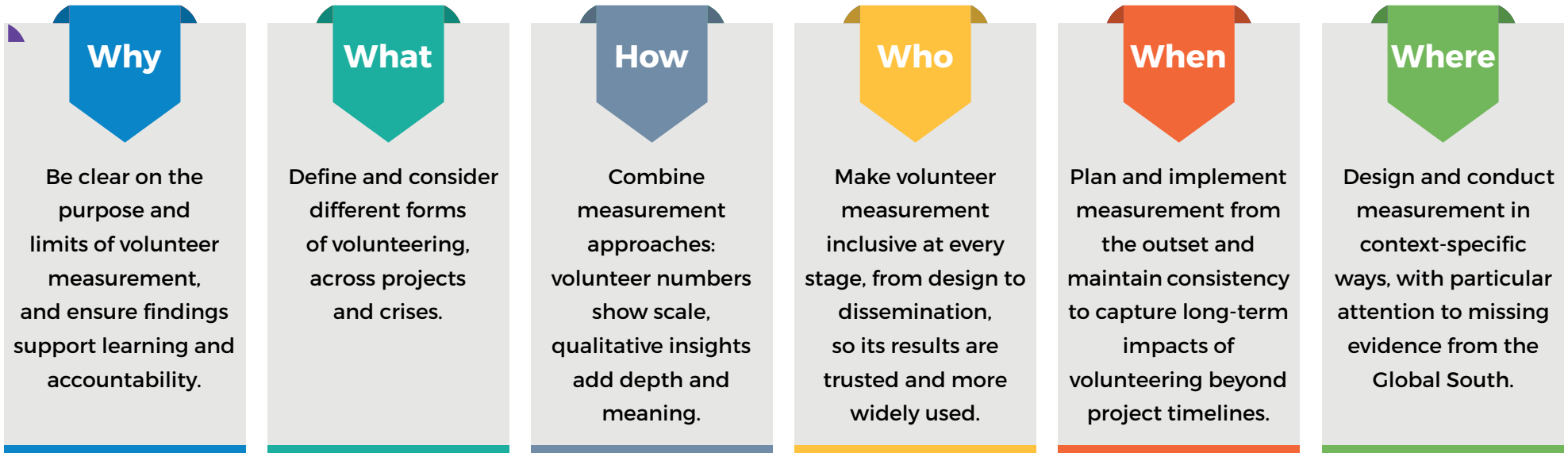
8.1. Introduction

Volunteer measurement continues to evolve, reflecting changing priorities, methodologies and contexts. By engaging with the latest global debates on volunteer measurement, the 2026 SWVR has shown how measurement can capture the multiple personal, social, economic and systemic contributions volunteering makes within and across sectors. Measurement demonstrates the scale and diversity of volunteer action, enhancing its visibility and supporting the creation or strengthening of environments that allow volunteering to thrive. The Report has also shown how combining rigorous, comparable data with inclusive, context-sensitive methods can strengthen voices which are often absent from measurement discussions, revealing hidden contributions and driving more just and effective policy, programme design and implementation.

This final chapter distils the key messages and policy recommendations from the Report to advance volunteer measurement. It calls for clear and inclusive definitions of volunteering, multi-method and co-designed measurement approaches, transparent and purpose-led use of data, long-term measurement embedded in policies beyond projects and crises, and globally relevant approaches that recognize diverse contexts. In outlining pathways for advancing the measurement of volunteering, these recommendations aim to deepen collaboration among different interest groups, support more meaningful participation in sustainable development and generate better knowledge to build individual and community resilience through volunteering in the years ahead.

Kamila Saidova, UN Volunteer with UN Women, supports the 16 Days of Activism campaign against gender-based violence in Uzbekistan. *Credit: UNV 2024*

Figure 8.1. Overview of the 2026 SWVR recommendations on volunteer measurement



8.2. Key messages and policy recommendations

Building on the insights from the 2026 SWVR, the following key messages and recommendations contribute to strengthening volunteer measurement debates and practices. This chapter highlights what, how, who, why, when and where to measure for more inclusive and comparable evidence on volunteering.

• Why?

It is vital to understand why volunteerism is being measured. Data gathered for one objective may be unreliable or misleading if repurposed without context. Transparent documentation of why and how data about volunteers and volunteering is collected helps interest groups interpret results appropriately. Treating measurement as a learning tool supports continuous improvement in creating an environment conducive to volunteering and to volunteer practice and policy, while reinforcing accountability. A concerted global effort is needed to translate measurement standards into widespread practice.

Key recommendations:

- **Academic and research institutions, civil society and organizations involving volunteers, and National Statistical Offices:** Clearly document and share the reasons for volunteer measurement and the methods of data collection to ensure that users understand its validity and limitations
- **Member States, civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Frame volunteer measurement as a practical tool to support learning, inform policy development and strengthen accountability, ensuring the active use of findings for decision-making and action
- **Member States and National Statistical Offices:** Invest in generating statistics on volunteer work and expand technical knowledge of national statistical offices in generating data on volunteering as part of labour force or household surveys by 2030
- **UNV and Member States:** UNV to continue supporting Member States with technical and capacity-building assistance to integrate standardized volunteer data into national surveys, particularly across the Global South.

• What?

Volunteerism encompasses organization-based and informal roles, mutual aid, episodic and sustained participation and digital and in-person engagement. These forms often cut across specific development outcomes, projects and crisis contexts. When measuring volunteering, a clear, operational definition that reflects this breadth can prevent underestimation and ensure diverse contributions are visible in evidence and decision-making. Using such definitions in organizational and national policies and reporting standards, as well as being transparent about how they were arrived at, supports comparability while recognizing the wide range of volunteer experiences. Measuring volunteering needs to go beyond participation rates to capture its broader social and economic impacts. This includes developing methods that quantify and qualitatively assess the contributions of both formal and informal volunteers, especially in relation to specific targets of the Agenda for Sustainable Development. Collecting such information can inform policies that recognize and strengthen community-based social safety nets alongside formal structures.

Key recommendations:

- **Member States, civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Use a clear and inclusive definition of volunteering that captures the full diversity of forms and experiences to embed in national policies.
- **National Statistical Offices, civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Integrate diverse forms of volunteering into reporting systems, data frameworks and relevant legislation to ensure they are systematically and consistently captured
- **Academic and research institutions, civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Develop and refine methodologies that capture the impact and socioeconomic contributions of both formal and informal volunteering, linking results to SDG targets and community resilience

Nao Tojo (left), UN Volunteer with WFP, discusses nutrition education materials with government staff in Indonesia. Her assignment is supported by JICA. *Credit: UNV 2024*

• How?

Multi-method design is essential to capture both the scale and meaning of volunteerism. Quantitative approaches show prevalence, intensity and trends, while qualitative approaches explain motivations, barriers and mechanisms of change. Combining multiple strategies can increase validity and reveal dimensions of volunteering that single methods can miss. Clear protocols, transparent documentation and targeted guidance on ways of measuring volunteering enable consistent, high-quality measurement with increased community ownership and participation.

Key recommendations:

- **Member States, civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Promote and incentivize multi-method approaches in evaluations and official reporting to generate more comprehensive, nuanced and reliable evidence on volunteering
- **Member States and National Statistical Offices:** Support the integration of volunteer work modules into national household or labour force surveys and include systematic analysis of results in development reporting processes
- **Academic and research institutions, civil society and organizations involving volunteers, and National Statistical Offices:** Adopt the GIVE and apply its four key dimensions to measure volunteering: value to the individual, value to community, value to the economy and sustaining an enabling environment
- **UN entities, academic and research institutions, and civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Produce clear, low-cost guidance tools and present findings in multiple languages and accessible formats so that different groups can use and apply measurement insights

• Who?

Measurement gains credibility and relevance when designed and implemented in an inclusive way. Engaging volunteer-involving organizations, community networks and historically underrepresented groups, particularly from the Global South, builds trust and ownership. Co-designing measurement approaches with volunteers, community members, donors, programme managers and other interest groups enhances legitimacy. Ensuring accessible communication and responsible data-sharing enables different groups to use measurement results for learning and strengthening volunteer action for change.

Key recommendations:

- **Academic and research institutions, National Statistical Offices, civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Incorporate diverse perspectives throughout the design, implementation, and analysis of volunteer measurement
- **UN entities, academic and research institutions, and civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Facilitate learning and knowledge exchange through online and in-person communities of practice to explore, test and refine measurement tools and approaches

• When?

The impact of volunteering is often felt over the long term. Measurement should therefore be planned and implemented from the outset and extend beyond project lifecycles. Designing follow-up measurement activities over time makes it possible to capture sustained outcomes for volunteers, communities and people-state relationships, rather than simply short-term outputs. Embedding these commitments into strategies and policies ensures continuity and prevents measurement from becoming an afterthought.

Key recommendations:

- **Member states, civil society and organizations involving volunteers:** Integrate measurement frameworks into the planning and design stages of volunteering strategies, policies, and projects from the beginning.
- **Member states, civil society and organizations involving volunteers, academic and research institutions:** Develop measurement tools and processes that allow for long-term tracking, follow-up assessments and integration of indicators that can capture changes beyond project timelines

• Where?

Globally relevant measurement must reflect context-specific, community-embedded and crisis-responsive volunteering worldwide. Recognizing how power relations shape metrics helps produce more inclusive evidence. Paying attention to local contexts through piloting and peer learning should be encouraged, while preserving core elements that maintain the comparability of volunteer experiences across countries and regions where appropriate.

Rahma Ally Juma, a National UN Community Volunteer with UNDP in Tanzania, serves as a Coastal Communities Mobilizer for the Bahari Maisha project. *Credit: UNV 2025*

8.3. Conclusion

As this Report has demonstrated, volunteering generates both the everyday connections that foster social cohesion and the vital responses needed in moments of crisis. By measuring volunteering effectively, interest groups can not only recognize its profound contributions to individuals, communities and economies but also create the evidence base needed to sustain and strengthen enabling environments for volunteering. The recommendations presented in this report provide a roadmap for advancing measurement practices that are inclusive, rigorous and responsive to diverse sectors and contexts.

As volunteering continues to evolve in response to global challenges, so too must approaches to understanding and valuing it. By working collaboratively to improve how volunteering is measured, we can better support the millions of volunteers worldwide whose contributions are essential to achieving sustainable development and building a more equitable future for all.

Key recommendations:

- **Member states, civil society and organizations involving volunteers, academic and research institutions:** Analyze existing definitions and measurement practices to reveal how power dynamics have shaped what counts as volunteering and adjust methods to capture overlooked but locally relevant activities
- **UNV, civil society and organizations involving volunteers, academic and research institutions:** Create participatory spaces and tools for a diverse range of groups to share knowledge and foster innovation for more inclusive measurement approaches

Evelyn Happy Katono from Uganda is an Associate Field Officer serving with UNHCR in Nigeria. *Credit: UNV 2024*

APPENDIX A: Methodological note

A

Equitable partnerships and collaborative ways of working

Equitable research partnerships have been at the heart of developing the 2026 SWVR. A collaborative and inclusive project ecosystem was created, allowing the combined voices and experiences of authors and collaborators from across the world to shape the thematic chapters of the Report. This has ensured that the final Report presents a diverse range of voices and experiences.

The thematic chapters (1, 2, 4, 5 and 6) of the Report were co-led simultaneously by technical experts from the Global South and Global North. The Northumbria University Centre for Global Development (CGD) played a key coordinating role, ensuring a cohesive narrative was established. To ensure that the writing of the Report aligned with the principles of equitable partnerships, a development plan was set out for each chapter and agreed with the UNV team. Chapters were then developed and reviewed iteratively during 2025. This approach reinforced the collaborative ethos of bridging local and global action, as championed in the 2015 and 2018 SWVR Reports.

Ethical considerations

The research work undertaken for chapters 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 of the 2026 SWVR was approved by the Northumbria University Ethics Committee. The production of the Report was guided by a robust ethical framework that encompassed data integrity, inclusivity, collaboration and accountability. All secondary data were used in accordance with intellectual property rights, licensing agreements and copyright laws. Careful attention was paid to accuracy, relevance and transparency in referencing. Personal data protection was strictly upheld to ensure that no identifiable or sensitive information was included, and all data were stored securely online. Co-authors followed a shared code of conduct and collaborated through open communication, shared decision-making and transparent documentation to maintain cohesion and consistency in close coordination with the UNV.

Case studies

The primary data-collection exercise for the 2026 SWVR focused on case studies gathered through an online open call which complemented the comprehensive secondary data analysis undertaken for the Report. The call for case studies was widely distributed for two months (March-April 2025) and gathered examples of innovative approaches being used to measure volunteering worldwide. Contributions were accepted from individuals, organizations and researchers engaged in assessing the value and impact of volunteering at community, organizational and academic levels. Only minimal personal data (i.e. name, email address and organizational affiliation) were collected, alongside descriptive information about each case, including its context, innovations, outcomes and lessons learned. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with respondents given the option to anonymize their submissions if selected for publication. Case studies were selected collaboratively by the Northumbria University research team and UNV to ensure a balance of approaches and regional representation. Any identifying details retained were agreed in writing with contributors to ensure transparency and recognition of their contributions while upholding the project's ethical standards.

In addition to these case studies, UNV selected quotes from UN Volunteers that are cited throughout the Report, with all contributions gathered and used in accordance with UNV's ethical guidelines. All images used in this Report were provided either by UNV or the case study box contributors, in compliance with UNV's third-party image use policy.

SWVR policy workshop

As part of the work informing the 2026 SWVR recommendations and impact pathways strategy, a policy workshop on the measurement of volunteering was organized by Northumbria University in collaboration with the UNV in Siem Reap, Cambodia, before the Annual Conference of International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCO) in September 2025. Adopting a participatory approach, the workshop was attended by 16 participants from different sectors and focused on gathering strategic insights, exploring the challenges they face, and identifying innovative ways to share knowledge and build capacity to strengthen volunteer measurement globally. This has ensured that the Report's recommendations and dissemination approach are responsive to the needs of sector stakeholders.

The 2025 SWVR policy workshop was attended by Aziza Rahman (Bangladesh Statistical Office), Edem Mensan Kossi Agode (National Agency for Volunteerism in Togo - ANVT), Huong Tran (Australian Volunteers Program - AVP), Jay Ancheta (Habitat for Humanity International - HFHI), Juan Ángel Poyatos (Volies - Voluntariado y Estrategia), Lucie Morillon (France Volontaires), Mayuko Onuki (Waseda University), Mel Godwaldt (World University Service of Canada - WUSC), Papa Diouf (VSO), Ratherford Mwaruta (Zimbabwe Workcamp Association and Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service - CCIVS) and Zhai Yan (Beijing Pro Bono Foundation). It was and co-facilitated by Bianca Fadel and Matt Baillie Smith (Northumbria University) and Emiliya Asadova (UNV), with the support of Laura Beckwith and Janet Clark (Northumbria University).

APPENDIX B: Global estimates of volunteer rates

B

Methodological annex

Volunteer rates are defined as the share of working-age individuals (those aged 15 and above) who engage in volunteer work during a reference period of four weeks. Regional and global estimates of volunteer rates for people aged 15 years and above are calculated following the methodology developed by the ILO Department of Statistics for the estimation of labour-market indicators. Table A1 reports the country composition of the five regions for which volunteer rates are estimated.

This methodological annex describes in more detail (i) the available data on volunteer rates, (ii) the process of data harmonization and input review, (iii) the methodological approach used to estimate volunteer rates at the global and regional levels and (iv) the collection and compilation of other country-level datasets for the construction of covariates used in the modelling approach.

Table A1. Regional composition

AFRICA	AMERICAS	ARAB STATES	ASIA AND THE PACIFIC	EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA
Algeria	Antigua and Barbuda	Bahrain	Afghanistan	Albania
Angola	Argentina	Iraq	Australia	Andorra
Benin	Bahamas	Jordan	Bangladesh	Armenia
Botswana	Barbados	Kuwait	Bhutan	Austria
Burkina Faso	Belize	Lebanon	Brunei Darussalam	Azerbaijan
Burundi	Bolivia	Occupied Palestinian Territory	Cambodia	Belarus
Cameroon	Brazil	Oman	China	Belgium
Cape Verde	Canada	Qatar	Cook Islands	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Central African RepublicChad	Chile	Saudi Arabia	Fiji	Bulgaria
Comoros	Colombia	Syrian Arab Republic	French Polynesia	Channel Islands
Congo	Costa Rica	United Arab Emirates	Guam	Croatia
Congo, Democratic Republic of the	Cuba	Yemen	Hong Kong, China	Cyprus
Côte d'Ivoire	Dominica		India	Czechia
Djibouti	Dominican Republic		Indonesia	Denmark
Egypt	Ecuador		Iran, Islamic Republic of	Estonia
Equatorial Guinea	El Salvador		Japan	Finland
	French Guiana		Kiribati	France
			Korea, Democratic People's Republic of	

AFRICA	AMERICAS	ARAB STATES	ASIA AND THE PACIFIC	EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA
Eritrea	Greenland		Korea, Republic of	Georgia
Eswatini	Grenada		Lao People's Democratic Republic	Germany
Ethiopia	Guadeloupe		Macau, China	Greece
Gabon	Guatemala		Malaysia	Hungary
Gambia	Guyana		Maldives	Iceland
Ghana	Haiti		Marshall Islands	Ireland
Guinea	Honduras		Micronesia, Federated States of	Israel
Guinea-Bissau	Jamaica		Mongolia	Italy
Kenya	Martinique		Myanmar	Kazakhstan
Lesotho	Mexico		Nauru	Kyrgyzstan
Liberia	Netherlands Antilles		Nepal	Latvia
Libya	Nicaragua		New Caledonia	Liechtenstein
Madagascar	Panama		New Zealand	Lithuania
Malawi	Paraguay		Pakistan	Luxembourg
Mali	Peru		Palau	Malta
Mauritania	Puerto Rico		Papua New Guinea	Moldova
Mauritius	Saint Kitts and Nevis		Philippines	Republic of Monaco
Morocco	Saint Lucia		Samoa	Montenegro
Mozambique	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines		Singapore	Netherlands
Namibia	Suriname		Solomon Islands	North Macedonia
Niger	Trinidad and Tobago		Sri Lanka	Norway
Nigeria	United States		Taiwan, China	Poland
Rwanda	United States Virgin Islands		Thailand	Portugal
Reunion	Uruguay		Timor-Leste	Romania
Sao Tome and Principe	Venezuela, Bolivarian Republic of		Tonga	Russian Federation
Senegal			Tuvalu	San Marino
Seychelles			Vanuatu	Serbia
Sierra Leone			Viet Nam	Slovakia
Somalia				Slovenia
South Africa				Spain
South Sudan				Sweden
Sudan				Switzerland
Tanzania, United Republic of				Tajikistan
Togo				Turkmenistan
Tunisia				Türkiye
Uganda				Ukraine
Western Sahara				United Kingdom
Zambia				Uzbekistan
Zimbabwe				

1. Data availability

Regional and global volunteer rates for total volunteer work as well as organization-based and direct volunteer work were calculated based on all available country-level data from ILOSTAT (64 countries), the 2021 UNV-Gallup survey on volunteering and COVID-19 (eight countries) and the 2025 UNV survey on volunteering (eight countries). Tables A2 and A3 report the country coverage of ILOSTAT data on volunteer rates and the two ad hoc surveys on volunteering.

Information on total, organization-based and direct volunteer rates for the total population was available for 156 ,135 and 131 country-year surveys, respectively, across all available data sources, with data spanning the years from 2008 to 2025.

Table A2. Availability of volunteer rates data from national statistics

COUNTRY	TOTAL VOLUNTEER RATES	DIRECT VOLUNTEER RATES	ORG.-BASED VOLUNTEER RATES
Aruba			2010
Armenia	2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023		
Australia		2019, 2020	2010, 2014, 2016, 2019, 2020
Austria	2022	2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Belgium	2014, 2019	2014, 2015, 2019, 2022	2014, 2015, 2019, 2022
Bangladesh	2010, 2016, 2017, 2022	2010	2010
Bulgaria		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Brazil	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2022		
Canada	2018	2010, 2013, 2018	2010, 2013, 2018
Colombia	2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019		
Cabo Verde	2022, 2023	2012	2012
Costa Rica	2017, 2018, 2019		
Cyprus		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Czechia	2023	2015	2015
Germany		2015	2015
Denmark	2018, 2019, 2020, 2022	2015	2015
Estonia		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Finland		2015, 2021	2015, 2017, 2021
Falkland Islands, Malvinas	2016	2016	2016
France		2015, 2022	2013, 2015, 2022
Greece		2015, 2022	2015, 2022

COUNTRY	TOTAL VOLUNTEER RATES	DIRECT VOLUNTEER RATES	ORG.-BASED VOLUNTEER RATES
Guatemala	2019, 2022		
Croatia		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Hungary	2011, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023	2011, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023	2011, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023
Indonesia	2017, 2018		
Ireland	2013	2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Iceland		2015	2015
Israel	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023
Italy	2013	2013, 2015, 2022	2013, 2015, 2022
Japan	2021		
Kazakhstan	2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021		
Kenya	2016		
Republic of Korea			2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2023
Lithuania		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Luxembourg		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Latvia		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Republic of Moldova	2015		
Mexico	2018		
North Macedonia		2015	2015
Malta		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Mongolia	2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018		
Netherlands	2016	2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Norway		2015, 2022	2011, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2020, 2022
Nepal	2018		
New Zealand	2018, 2021	2008, 2012, 2016, 2018, 2021	2008, 2012, 2016, 2018, 2021
Peru	2017		
Poland	2016, 2022	2010, 2015, 2016, 2022	2010, 2015, 2016, 2022
Portugal	2012, 2018	2012, 2015, 2018, 2022	2012, 2015, 2018, 2022
Romania		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Russian Federation	2016, 2017, 2018	2016, 2017, 2018	2016, 2017, 2018
Saudi Arabia	2018	2018	2018
Singapore	2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2021, 2023		

COUNTRY	TOTAL VOLUNTEER RATES	DIRECT VOLUNTEER RATES	ORG.-BASED VOLUNTEER RATES
Sierra Leone	2014		
Serbia		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Slovakia		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Slovenia	2019	2015, 2019, 2022	2015, 2019, 2022
South Africa	2010, 2014, 2018	2010, 2014, 2018	2010, 2014, 2018
Spain		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Sweden		2015, 2022	2015, 2022
Switzerland	2010, 2013, 2016, 2020	2010, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2020	2010, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2020
Tajikistan	2016	2016	2016
Ukraine	2021	2021	2021
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	2014, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022	2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
United States of America			2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021, 2023

Table A3. Availability of volunteer rates data from ad hoc surveys

2021 Survey			2025 Survey		
Country	**Region**	**Income group**	**Country**	**Region**	**Income group**
Bolivia	Americas	Lower-middle income	Bolivia	Americas	Lower-middle income
India	Asia and the Pacific	Lower-middle income	China	Asia and the Pacific	Upper-middle income
Kenya	Africa	Lower-middle income	Ethiopia	Africa	Low income
Lebanon	Arab States	Lower-middle income	India	Asia and the Pacific	Lower-middle income
Senegal	Africa	Lower-middle income	Iraq	Arab States	Upper-middle income
Thailand	Asia and the Pacific	Upper-middle income	Jordan	Arab States	Lower-middle income
Turkey	Europe and Central Asia	Lower-middle income	Nigeria	Africa	Lower-middle income
Uzbekistan	Europe and Central Asia	Lower-middle income	Uganda	Africa	Low income

2. Data harmonization and input review

To enable the production of comparable global and regional volunteer work estimates, the underlying input data were first harmonized to a standard four-week reference period, consistent with the 19th ICLS definition. Around 20 per cent of available country-year survey data was already based on this recommended reference period. By contrast, about 56 per cent of data – mainly from national statistics and the ad hoc UNV-Gallup survey – used a 52-week (one-year) reference period, while the remainder relied on either a one-week (seven-day) or 12-week (three-month) period.

To ensure comparability, all rates reported with alternative reference periods were converted into four-week equivalents using adjustment coefficients derived through the following steps:

1. **Average rates by reference period:** For each type of volunteer work (total, direct and organization-based volunteer work) and for each reference period j (12 ,4 ,1 or 52 weeks), average volunteer rates were calculated across country-year surveys using that reference period.
2. **Reference-period-specific coefficient:** For each volunteer work type, a coefficient for each reference period j was obtained by dividing the average four-week volunteer rate by the average rate for the corresponding j-week period.
3. **Consolidated multipliers:** For each reference period j, a single multiplier was then derived by averaging the three type-specific coefficients.
4. **Adjustment of original rates:** Finally, volunteer rates measured with any non-four-week reference period were multiplied by the relevant multiplier, yielding four-week equivalent estimates.

The harmonization process described above implicitly assumes that volunteer rates calculated over different reference periods are based on similarly representative country-year samples. While this assumption is unlikely to hold fully given the limited data coverage and differences in the number of surveys and measurements available for any given country, average volunteer rates derived from country-year survey groups using different reference periods tend to increase with the length of the reference period used. This pattern suggests that no major systematic biases in country coverage are distorting the overall reliability of the four-week equivalent estimates.

The harmonized country-level data on volunteer rates were then assessed to retain only those observations considered sufficiently comparable across countries and of adequate quality. The selection criteria were designed to balance two objectives: on the one hand, minimizing the loss of data points in an already sparse evidence base; and on the other, ensuring that the retained input data were as consistent as possible and closely aligned with the 19th ICLS definition of volunteer work used to produce the estimates.

Data points were excluded in cases where information on different types of volunteer work activities was internally inconsistent – for example, when reported rates of direct volunteer work exceeded those for total volunteer work. Exclusions were also applied where multiple observations were available for the same country but showed sharp discontinuities over time, typically reflecting changes in survey methodology. In such cases, priority was given to the most recent data, as these are assumed to provide a more accurate picture of current volunteering patterns and, in most instances, to have been collected using improved measurement approaches. This review process, pooling all data sources and information by gender, leads to a total of 352 national measures of total volunteer rates, and 350 and 435 national measures of direct and organization-based volunteer work, respectively.

3. Methodology for estimating volunteer rates

Global and regional estimates of volunteer rates are produced using a modelling approach that closely follows the ILO methodology adopted for the estimation of labour-market indicators as part of the ILO Modelled Estimates collection. Volunteer rates are first estimated for a set of 189 countries and for all years from 2008 to 2025. To do so, the modelling approach exploits the relationship between volunteer rates and other country-specific (and gender-specific, whenever possible) characteristics and economic variables. The modelling approach starts by estimating total volunteer rates for all countries and years between 2008 and 2025, with disaggregation by gender. Then, volunteer rates for direct and organization-based volunteer work are estimated for all country-year combinations. Finally, national estimates are aggregated at the regional or global level to produce regional and global estimates of volunteer rates for total, organization-based and direct volunteer work engagement.

3.1 Modelling approach for total volunteer rates

Not all countries with available data on volunteering report statistics on total volunteer rates. More specifically, for some countries, information is available only on direct and organization-based volunteer work. To maximize the information content of the database, **the modelling approach begins by estimating the total volunteering rate for country-years where this information is missing, but some information is available on direct and / or organization-based volunteer work.**

This process exploits the relationship between different volunteering types to estimate total volunteer rates for country-years where both direct and organization-based volunteer work data are available but information on total volunteer work is missing. For this, a regression model is used to predict the total volunteer rate as a function of these two variables, allowing the relationship to vary by region and gender. Then, the predicted values for total volunteer rates are combined with the real data. Whenever actual country-level information on total volunteer rates exists, it is used directly as input for the model, while missing values are filled with the predictions derived from organization-based and direct volunteer rates. This approach makes it possible to maximize the number of data points that can be used as input for the modelling of total volunteer rates.

Next, total volunteer rates were estimated for 189 countries over the 2008 to 2025 period. The modelling approach draws on the observed relationship between the prevalence of total volunteer work and a range of country-specific characteristics. The choice of which characteristics or variables to include in the modelling approach is dictated by considerations on which country-specific dimensions may best predict engagement in volunteer work at the country level. Variables considered for testing include measures of economic development (GDP per capita, poverty rates, urbanization rates), demographic characteristics (percentage of the population above age 65), labour-market indicators (labour force participation rates, unemployment rates), measures of social and civic capital, religiosity and data on the number of blood donors and Red Cross volunteers. Gender-specific data are incorporated whenever possible, allowing the estimates to reflect differences between men and women. For countries without any information on total volunteer rates, the model additionally takes as a benchmark the regional averages of total volunteering rates estimated for countries with at least some information on volunteer work.

Several different statistical models or "specifications" can be used to predict volunteer rates. The challenge lies in identifying the specification that produces the most accurate and unbiased estimates. To do this, a procedure known as cross-validation is applied, which tests multiple candidate models to determine which minimizes the prediction error. The process involves repeatedly estimating models on random subsets of the data, predicting the missing values and calculating the associated errors. Each model is then evaluated using the pseudo-out-of-sample root mean squared error, allowing the selection of the statistical relationship that provides the most reliable estimates. Since volunteer rates are also estimated separately by gender, distinct models are developed for men and women, and the resulting figures are subsequently adjusted to ensure consistency with the overall population estimates.

As volunteer rates are expressed on a scale from 0 to 1, a logit transformation is applied to the target variable before estimation. This transformed variable is used in the cross-validation procedure. Once the best model is selected and estimates are obtained, these estimates are converted again on a 1-0 scale using an inverse logit transformation.

3.2 Modelling approach for direct and organization-based volunteer rates

Once estimates of total volunteer rates are produced for all country-year combinations, the modelling strategy proceeds to estimate volunteer rates for direct and organization-based volunteer work separately. These estimates are produced in essentially the same way as for total volunteer work, with the exception that estimates of total volunteer rates are used in the regression models as benchmark to target plausible rates of direct and organization-based volunteer work, and to ensure that neither direct nor organization-based volunteer rates as estimated by the model are higher than the estimates for total volunteer rates. A balancing exercise is also performed to ensure that volunteer rates for males and females are internally consistent with volunteer rates estimated for the entire working-age population.

3.3 From country-level estimates to aggregate estimates

Having obtained country-level estimates of total, direct and organization-based volunteer rates for each year and separately by gender, the next step is to obtain volunteer work estimates at the global and regional level. To do so, country-level volunteer rates are first combined with working-age population data to calculate the number of people engaged in volunteer work in each country and year. The benchmark for the estimates of

Table A4. Alternative estimates of overall volunteering rates

REGION	2018–2021 AVERAGE	2018–2025 AVERAGE	2022–2025 AVERAGE
Africa	52.4	55.5	58.5
Americas	23.4	26.8	30.3
Arab States	25.3	24.6	24.0
Asia and the Pacific	29.1	30.5	31.8
Europe and Central Asia	24.4	24.3	24.2
World	30.9	32.7	34.5

volunteer work numbers is the 2024 Revision of the United Nations World Population Prospects, which provides estimates and projections of the total population broken down into five-year age groups. The population base used to derive estimates of the number of people engaged in volunteer work by country is the working-age population. According to international standards on work statistics, which facilitate comparability of rates across countries, the working-age population comprises all individuals who are at least 15 years of age.

Country-level volunteer counts are then aggregated to the regional and global level and expressed as shares of the corresponding regional or global working-age population, yielding comparable regional volunteer rates for every year. To address the limited availability of direct data points and the reliance on imputed values, the final regional and global estimates presented in this chapter are calculated as averages of estimates over the 2025–2022 period. This averaging approach smooths year-to-year fluctuations, mitigates concerns of data sparsity for any given year and provides more robust estimates of global and regional volunteer rates.

Table A4 below presents estimates of total volunteer rates based on average volunteer rates at the global and regional level calculated across different time periods. Column 1 shows estimates based on the years –2018 2021; column 2 shows estimates based on the years 2025–2018; column 3 shows the preferred estimates as reported in the chapter and based on the years 2025–2022.

4. Additional data sources

Information from multiple data sources was compiled to generate a dataset of covariates to use as part of the regression-based approach to estimate volunteer rates (see below for more details on the estimation methodology). The key variables of interest and related sources are reported in Table A4 below and can be broadly grouped into covariates capturing civic capital and religiosity, measures of economic development, labour-market indicators and other measures of volunteering.

For covariates other than labour-market indicators, whenever information on a given variable is not available for all country-years, the following imputation techniques are applied:

- For countries with some information on a given covariate, the available data are interpolated to fill in information for missing years
- For countries without any information on a given covariate, regional averages are used to fill in missing information.

For covariates that capture labour-market conditions (namely the labour force participation rate and the unemployment rate) the ILO Modelled Estimates are used as explanatory variables instead of interpolating real data from labour force surveys or imputing regional averages for countries without data. The ILO Modelled Estimates series provides a complete set of internationally comparable labour statistics, including both nationally reported observations and imputed data for countries with missing

Table A5. Data sources and definition for covariates

VARIABLE	DEFINITION	SOURCE
Civic capital	Composite index, following Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales (2011) (total and by gender)	Integrated Values Surveys (1981-2022)
Religiosity (%)	Share of individuals who think religion is important or very important in their life (total and by gender)	Integrated Values Surveys (1981-2022)
Human Capital Index	Composite index	World Bank
Human Development Index	Composite index	UNDP
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	GDP per capita, 2021 international $ at PPP	IMF World Economic Outlook October 2024 and ILOSTAT
Labour Force Participation Rate (%)	Share of the working-age population that is part of the labour force (total and by gender)	ILO Modelled Estimates collection, November 2024
Unemployment rate (%)	Share of the labour force that is unemployed (total and by gender)	ILO Modelled Estimates collection, November 2024
Red Cross volunteers (%)	Share of the working-age population that is registered as a Red Cross volunteer (total and by gender)	IFRC Network Databank
Blood donors (%)	Share of the working-age population that is a registered blood donor (total and by gender)	IFRC Network Databank

data. The imputations are produced through a series of econometric models maintained by the ILO, which rely on the relationship between country characteristics and the target labour-market variables of interest. This methodology is superior to a simple interpolation of existing data or imputation through regional averages, in that it allows for country-specific information to be used for the imputation of the labour force and unemployment rate of countries with missing data. However, estimates for countries with very limited or no labour-market information have a high degree of uncertainty and are subject to revisions as new data become available.

Table A6. Enabling Environment Country Case Studies

Country	Laws / Policies	Funding Mechanisms	Collaborative Organisations / Strategies	Key Focus Areas
Brazil	Law on Social Volunteerism (2004)	Federal funding, state resources, CSR contributions	National councils link government, business and CSOs; partnerships with schools/ universities	Civic responsibility, social development
Canada	National Volunteer Strategy (2001, updated); provincial frameworks	Federal and provincial funding; grants to volunteer centres	Volunteer Canada coordinates networks with government, business and civil society; National Volunteer Week	Civic participation, community service, inclusivity
China	Beijing Regulations (2007); Draft National Volunteer Service Law	Strong central and local government funding	Communist Youth League and Beijing Volunteer Association; state-led registration and mobilization	Disaster response, mega-events (Olympics), poverty
India	National Policy on Voluntary Sector (2006); NSS; NYKS	Government grants to NSS/ NYKS; donor funding in sectors	Universities, NGOs and international agencies partner with the government	Youth mobilization, health, sanitation, education
Kenya	Draft National Volunteerism Policy (2008+)	Donor agencies (UNV, USAID, EU) and CSO resources	Kenya National Volunteerism Programme; collaboration with VIOs, NGOs, government	Youth employment, civic service, development goals
Lebanon	National Permanent Committee on Volunteerism (no stand-alone law)	International donors and NGOs; minimal state funding	UNV, CSOs and the Ministry of Social Affairs; youth camps; advocacy for curriculum reform	Civic renewal, youth development, social cohesion
Mexico	Law on Social Volunteerism (2005)	Mixed public and private funding; philanthropic support	National Commission and National Network on Volunteerism; NGO-university-government partnerships	Community development, disaster response, social equity
Norway	Act on the Right to Volunteer (2000s); state–civil society compacts	Strong public grant system for NGOs	Institutionalized dialogue; volunteer councils; state–civil society agreements	Civic participation, rights-based volunteer support
South Africa	Disaster Management Act (2002); Health Guidelines (2001); Immigration Act (2004)	Donor and NGO support; limited state budget	NGOs, faith-based organizations, international donors; the ubuntu philosophy integrated into volunteer policies	Disaster response, HIV/AIDS care, community health
United Kingdom	National Minimum Wage Act (1998, voluntary worker exemption); Strategy for Volunteering Infrastructure (2004)	Government funding for campaigns; local centre support	Volunteering England, Volunteer Scotland, NCVO and local centres; employer-supported volunteering; national campaigns	Civic engagement, community service, local development

APPENDIX C: Framework of the Global Index of Volunteer Engagement

C

Technical note

The GIVE is a multidimensional measure of volunteering that highlights various aspects of volunteering, emphasizing the well-being, life satisfaction and social benefits it brings to individuals and communities. It evaluates the economic contribution of volunteering through metrics such as the number of hours volunteered and the replacement cost to the organizations, (which quantifies the benefits of volunteering by estimating the expense of substituting volunteers with paid staff) alongside national data on factors that are conducive to volunteering. The GIVE uses microdata from household surveys to measure the value of volunteering at the individual and community levels, in addition to measuring the economic value of volunteering. Unlike the Human Development Index (HDI), which requires all indicators to come from the same survey, the GIVE allows microlevel data to be sourced from various household surveys.

The development of the GIVE framework involved extensive research and engagement with stakeholders, including academics, the United Nations, intergovernmental organizations and representatives from various sectors such as voluntary and civil society organizations. This collaborative approach ensured that the GIVE incorporated diverse perspectives, making it a resilient tool for assessing volunteering at both individual and community levels. More details about the overall methodology will be available soon, along with Stata programs (Stata do-files) for calculating the GIVE and its components.

When implemented, the GIVE will rely on national household surveys for several countries. It will feature the same functional form and indicators as illustrated here, encompassing four dimensions: Value to the Individual, Value to the Community, Value to the Economy and Enabling Environment. These dimensions will have equal weighting, following similar methods to those used in well-known global indices such as the HDI (UNDP, 2025) and the MPI (OPHI and UNDP, 2023). The scoring system is designed such that the maximum score attainable is 100 per cent, evenly distributed across the four dimensions, with each contributing up to 25 per cent. The number of indicators within each dimension will vary based on contextual relevance and data availability, facilitating a tailored approach to measuring volunteering. It is recommended that each dimension includes between four and ten indicators, with the economic dimension allowing at least two indicators. Each indicator will be assigned a weight equal to 1 divided by the number of indicators within each respective dimension.

In summary, the GIVE is a comprehensive effort to measure the complex nature of volunteering. Using a methodological approach that integrates diverse data sources and stakeholder feedback, it seeks to offer valuable insights into how volunteering contributes to individual and community well-being.

Process

In designing and developing the GIVE framework, complex decisions were navigated regarding the relationships between indicators and their collective influence on the volunteering score. For example, the unit of analysis, the dimensions (or indicators) to be included, their appropriate cut-off points to identify positive volunteering in each indicator, the structure (including weights) to be used to aggregate volunteer indicators into a single volunteer score and how to identify a person as a positive volunteer based on the weighted aggregate score.

For example, a subject's volunteering can be assessed using dimensions (or indicators). The level of volunteering of person i for indicator j is denoted by y_{ij} (i=1,2,...,n. j=1,2,...,d), where n and d are the number of volunteers and indicators considered. Each indicator is assigned a weight based on its value in relation to other indicators.

The relative weight attached to each indicator is the same across all subjects and is denoted by w_j, such that the sum of all w_j equals 1. The final step in producing a GIVE subindex is to select an aggregation procedure that transforms the multidimensional raw data into a unidimensional measure. In formal terms, this means specifying an aggregation function that assigns an index value to every concrete set of observed indicator values.

Three crucial decisions were made: (i) the normalization approach; (ii) choosing the numerical form of the index, and (iii) specifying the functional shape of the aggregation function (Babbie and others, 2015). This third decision was challenging because the genuine functional relationship between the volunteer indicators and the dimension is unknown. As a result, there was considerable leeway when designing their aggregation function. Munck and Verkuilen (2002) suggest that one unfortunate consequence of this leeway is that simplistic and somewhat arbitrary functional assumptions are often made. However, it was essential to understand the empirical implications of these assumptions more deeply.

The impact of normalization methods, such as min-max scaling and z-scores, significantly influences the choice of aggregation methods and the subsequent interpretation of GIVE scores. Several researchers have highlighted concerns regarding the interpretation of scores, emphasizing that the normalization method selected can lead to varying outcomes. Ultimately, the choice of normalization method rests with the modeller, who must weigh the implications of their selection.

Utilizing z-scores allows for the calculation of the first two statistical moments of each contributing indicator, resulting in a uniform weighting system that operates independently of the unit of measurement. This approach is particularly suitable in scenarios where there is no established framework to determine the relative importance of different indicators. On the other hand, the min-max normalization technique can yield a dynamic benchmark that shifts as the mean and variance of indicators fluctuate. This variability often reflects changes in the data from one year to the next or among different indicators, rather than capturing the true underlying shifts in volunteering conditions. In moving forward after implementing the GIVE across countries, the clarity and consistency of the scores could be enhanced by adopting a method that normalizes z-scores based on the mean and standard deviation of a base-year. By measuring progress against this consistent baseline distribution, a metric could be created that is not only easier to interpret but also offers a cardinal score that remains comparable over time.

With regards to aggregation methods, the common choices considered included the simple additive weighting method and the weighted product method. For the GIVE, the primary aggregation method was the additive method of aggregation, where the volunteering score (e.g., Impact on Individuals) (V_S) is computed for a person by summing the weighted indicators to obtain a score. Score:

$$V_{s(i)} = \sum_{j=1}^{d} w_j \, y_{ij}$$

In line with other well-known global indices, such as the HDI and the MPI (OECD, 2018; OHPI, 2013), it is recommended to use equal weights for the indicator variables within each dimension. This approach is preferable to alternatives such as weights based on expert opinion or those derived from Principal Component Analysis (PCA), as described by Hastie and others (2009). Using equal weights offers a straightforward and transparent methodology, ensuring that each component of the index is treated with equal importance. This approach minimizes biases that may arise from subjective expert opinions, which can vary significantly based on individual perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, equal weighting simplifies communication and interpretation, making it easier for stakeholders to understand the index without needing to navigate complex statistical explanations. It enables a more democratic representation of indicators, lending each aspect an equal voice in determining the overall score.

In contrast, weighting based on expert opinion can reflect the biases or preferences of the experts involved, potentially skewing the index results in favour of specific parameters. Similarly, different weights derived from PCA can complicate the process, introducing complexity that may obscure the clarity of the index. While PCA aims to reduce dimensionality by identifying underlying relationships among variables, it can sometimes lead to an overemphasis on certain factors based on their variance rather than their intrinsic value. Ultimately, the choice of equal weighting promotes consistency and fairness in the evaluation process, aligning the index with broader goals of transparency and accessibility, similar to that which has been achieved with the HDI and MPI. This foundational principle ensures that the index remains a reliable tool for comparison across various contexts and populations.

The individual scores of all individuals are summarized by means or median, according to individual capabilities, e.g., gender, age, education, regional or country level.

The scores for the four dimensions of the GIVE, namely individual (I_{Indi}), community (I_{Comm}), economic value (I_{Econ}) and enabling environment (I_{Enab}), are subsequently combined into a comprehensive national composite GIVE index. This aggregation is achieved by applying the geometric mean to the scores of the four dimensions, given as $(I_{Indi} \times I_{Comm} \times I_{Econ} \times I_{Enab})^{1/4}$. This holistic approach underscores the intricate interconnectedness of these factors in advancing the overall understanding of volunteering on a national scale. The approach also allows for partial non-compensability of the dimensions as opposed to the application of the arithmetic mean. Microdata obtained through household surveys should be used to calculate the subindices related to individual, community and economic value. Furthermore, much as the methodologies used in constructing other indices, such as the HDI, the indicators employed in this could come from different surveys.

To illustrate the computational methodology behind the GIVE, two hybrid synthetic datasets were used that integrate real-world data with artificial data, the latter being generated based on demographic profiles from the real data. This synthesis was founded on household survey data that specifically captured both individual and community volunteer contributions. We introduced two variables into the analysis: the total number of households engaged in volunteer work, determined through a suitable predictive model and the calculation of replacement costs, derived using a global hourly rate. Equal weighting at the micro level was adopted, to ensure the flexibility to substitute one indicator for another, depending on the specific data sources or survey responses available. This method not only enhances the adaptability of the analysis but also makes informed decisions possible, even when specific data is limited or unavailable. While the additive method is favoured, the potential for simplistic assumptions exists, underscoring the importance of carefully considering the empirical implications arising from these choices.

In this methodology, individual and community indicators were measured using a five-point Likert scale, where responses ranged from 1 (very unimportant) to 5 (very important). For each dataset, seven individual dimension indicators and six community dimension indicators were recorded. Two additional economic variables were generated: the total number of hours volunteered and the associated monthly replacement costs. To further supplement our analysis, four enabling factors were included – programmes, laws, schemes and policies – each coded as a binary variable, where a score of one indicates the presence of that factor and zero signifies its absence.

Both the Likert and binary response formats were normalized to a standard scale of 0 to 100, expressed as a percentage. In this context, a score of 100 per cent indicates the most favourable level of volunteering. In comparison, a score of 0 per cent signifies the least favourable, with intermediate scores reflecting varying degrees of the maximum possible performance in volunteerism.

a. To normalize the values for the Likert indicators, the min-max method was applied following the formula:

$$Ind_{100} = 100 \times \left(\frac{\text{respose-1}}{\text{5-1}} \right)$$

where the «response» denotes the response selected by the participant for that specific indicator. To maintain identical scores of 1 to 5 at the country level, the normalized country data could be rescaled from a 0-100 range when dealing with multiple countries.

$$4 \times \left(\frac{\text{country score-sample minimum}}{\text{sample maximum-sample minimum}} \right) + 1$$

b. For the community impact dimension score, the score is calculated as the total number of positive responses, each valued at 1, out of seven indicators, which are measured on a binary scale (0/1), and the normalized score is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Comm}_{100} = 100 \times \left(\frac{\text{no of positives (1)}}{7} \right)$$

where 7 is the number of indicators that were used for measuring the value of volunteering in communities and societies.

c. For measuring hours volunteered, the following formula was used:

$$\text{Hours}_{100} = 100 \times \left(\frac{\text{Hours-1}}{\text{160-1}} \right)$$

In this case, 1 and 160 represent the minimum and maximum number of hours an individual might realistically work in a month, assuming a standard 40-hour workweek. Similarly, the replacement cost was normalized using the formula:

$$\text{Cost}_{100} = 100 \times \left(\frac{\text{respose-1}}{\text{5-1}} \right)$$

Here, 250 and 4500 denote the minimum and maximum global wages per month.

d. For the enabling environment dimension score, the score comprises the simple sum of positive responses (each valued at 1), and the normalized score is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Enabler}_{100} = 100 \times \left(\frac{\text{no of positives (1)}}{4} \right)$$

where 4 is the number of enabling environmental factors.

Example calculations

Tables T1 and T2 present the results based on two samples of hybrid synthetic data, each using information from a subset of the World Value Survey data. For instance, data from country A, analysed in Table T1, reveal an even distribution of volunteering scores across the three dimensions among different demographic groups, with individual dimension estimates around 50 out of 100. The community, based on the included indicators, is on the far lower end, indicating significantly more favourable conditions – particularly in relation to economic indicators and enabling environments. The overall value and benefit of volunteering was 28 per cent, below the half mark, largely driven down by very limited participation in community activities and engagements linked to the chosen community volunteering engagement indicators selected for the demonstration.

In contrast, the computation for volunteering domains in Country B, as presented in Table T2, highlights highly favourable values of volunteering, especially among women in late adulthood and among volunteers with higher education. Overall, the benefits for individuals were rated at 77 per cent, while for the community the seven indicators were at 11.00 per cent and the economic value of volunteering was estimated at 45 per cent. For Country B, the overall value and benefit of volunteering was estimated at 41 per cent, again driven by less favourable outcomes on engagements related to critical SDGs in communities and societies.

To test the sensitivity and robustness of the aggregation method used for the demonstration, alternatives were considered, such as the

geometric mean and weights based on the first principal component from a PCA. The results are presented in Figure F1 for Country B for individual dimension scores. These results are largely unaffected by the aggregation, showing the robustness of the simple methods used here. The dimension scores were also computed by varying the number of indicators used and, by and large, the same results were obtained.

In summary, it has been demonstrated how to use the framework to compute the GIVE using macro data and enabling data at both the macro and country levels. In the actual implementation of the GIVE across countries, there will be a need to identify comparable household survey data and GIVE dimensions and indicators to standardize the GIVE between countries.

Table A7: Summary statistics for the four GIVE dimensions by important demographics and for the overall GIVE: Country A.

Dimensions and Indicators	Indicator weight	Dimension score (simple equal-weighted average) mean, median 0–100 scale	Dimension weight	GIVE $(I_{Indi} \times I_{Comm} \times I_{Econ} \times I_{Enab})^{1/4}$
Value to the Individual 1. Helping disadvantaged people 2. Identifying with people who suffer 3. Personal fulfilment and life satisfaction 4. Social reasons 5. Gaining new skills and useful experience 6. Strengthened self-efficacy and confidence 7. Solidarity with the economically disadvantaged 8. Contributing to my local community 9. Bringing about social or political c**hange** 10. **Compassion for those in need**	1/10	**Gender** Male: 49.89, 50 Female: 50.16, 50 **Age group (years)** 15-34: 50.06, 50.0 35-49: 49.81, 50.0 50+: 50.26, 50, (0) **Education** Lower: 50.3, 50.00 Middle: 50.04, 50.00 Upper: 50.10, 50.00 **Overall individual index:** 50.03, 50.00	1/4	$(50 \times 1.7 \times 81.0 \times 100)^{1/4} = 28$
Value to the Community 1. Volunteering in social welfare services 2. Volunteering in religious activities 3. Volunteering in local political action groups 4. Volunteering in health services 5. Volunteering in educational and cultural activities 6. Volunteering in youth and women's services 7. Volunteering in environmental and animal rights initiatives	1/7	**Gender** Male: 1.45, 0.0 Female: 1.87, 0.0 **Age group (years)** 15-34: 0.86, 0, (0) 34-49: 1.99, 0, (0) 50+: 2.03, 0, (0) **Education** Lower: 1.71, 0 Middle: 1.64, 0 Upper: 1.64, 0 **Community index:** 1.67, 0	1/4	
Value to the Economy (synthetic data) 1. Volunteer hours 2. Cost savings	½	**Gender** Male: 80.93, 82.22 Female: 80.69, 81.39 **Age group** 15–34: 75.71, 75.22 35–49: 82.66, 82.22 50+: 84.72, 84.01 **Education** Lower: 79.68, 79.27 Middle: 81.40, 82.45 Upper: 80.33, 80.70 **Economic index:** 80.80, 81.93	1/4	
Enabling Environment 1. Laws 2. Policies 3. Programmes 4. Schemes	¼	Laws: Yes: 1 Policies: Yes: 1 Programmes: Yes: 1 Schemes: Yes: 1 **Enabling index:** 100*4/4=100	1/4	
Total	**4**		**1**	**1**

Table A8: Summary statistics for the four GIVE dimensions by important demographics and for the overall GIVE: Country B.

Dimensions and Indicators	Indicator weight	Dimension score (simple equal-weighted average) mean, median (IQR) 0–100 scale	Dimension weight	GIVE $(I_{Indi} \times I_{Comm} \times I_{Econ} \times I_{Enab})^{1/4}$
Value to the Individual 11. Helping disadvantaged people 12. Identifying with people who suffer 13. Personal fulfilment and life satisfaction 14. Social reasons 15. Gaining new skills and useful experience 16. Strengthened self-efficacy and confidence 17. Solidarity with the economically disadvantaged 18. Contributing to my local community 19. Bringing about social or political change 1. Compassion for those in need	1/10	**Gender** Male: 75.35, 77.5, (27.5) Female: 78.93, 82.5, (20) **Age group (years)** 15-34: 76.43, 80.0, (25) 35-49: 77.15, 80.0, (25) 50+: 77.94, 82.5, (25) **Education** Lower: 77.63, 80.0, (22.5) Middle: 74.01, 77.5, (25) Upper: 68.55, 70.0, (32.5) **Overall individual index:** 77.07, 80.0, (25)	1/4	$(77 \times 11.7 \times 42.0 \times 75)^{1/4} = 41.0$
Value to the Community 1. Volunteering in social welfare services 2. Volunteering in religious activities 3. Volunteering in local political action groups 4. Volunteering in health services 5. Volunteering in educational and cultural activities 6. Volunteering in youth and women's services 7. Volunteering in environmental and animal rights initiatives	1/7	**Gender** Male: 10.33, 0.0, (14.29) Female: 13.09, 14.29, (14.29) **Age group (years)** 15-34: 10.42, 14.29, (14.29) 34-49: 12.04, 14.29, (14.29) 50+: 12.93, 14.29, (14.29) **Education** Lower: 11.08, 14.29, (14.29) Middle: 15.52, 14.28, (14.29) Upper: 14.29, 14.29, (14.29) **Community index:** 11.66, 14.29, (14.29)	1/4	
Value to the Economy (synthetic data) 1. Volunteer hours 2. Cost savings	½	**Gender** Male: 46.12, 41.26, (51.72) Female: 48.00, 41.31, (51.73) **Age group** 15–34: 7.59, 0.36, (18.05) 35–49: 52.40, 41.31, (28.69) 50+: 99.93, 99.92, (0.05) **Education** Lower: 46.08, 41.27, (51.76) Middle: 44.96, 41.23, (51.64) Upper: 39.48, 41.27, (22.86) **Economic index:** 47.02, 41.27, (51.71)	1/4	
Enabling Environment 1. Laws 2. Policies 3. Programmes 4. Schemes	¼	Laws: Yes: 1 Policies: Yes: 1 Programs: Yes: 1 Schemes: Yes: 0 **Enabling index:** 100*3/4=75%	1/4	
Total	**4**		**1**	**1**

Figure F1: GIVE dimension scores used for gender aggregation methods

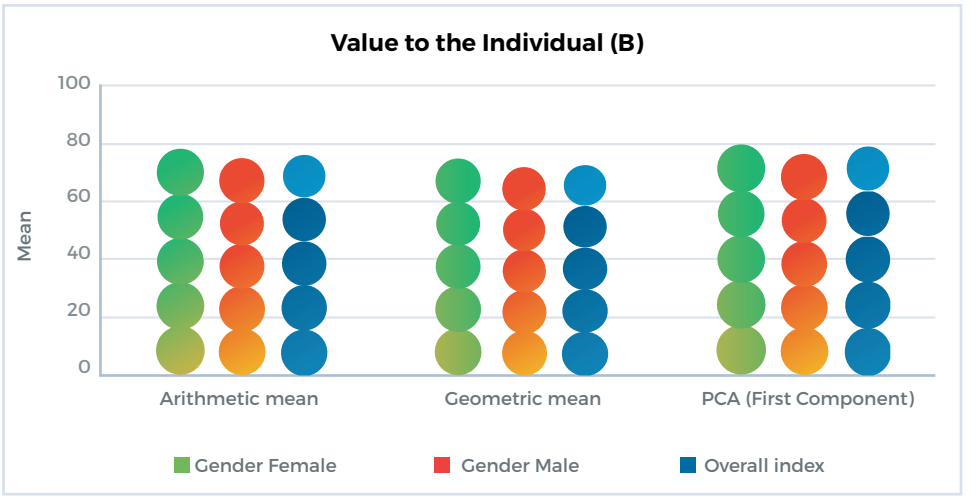


Figure F2: GIVE dimension scores used for age-related aggregation methods

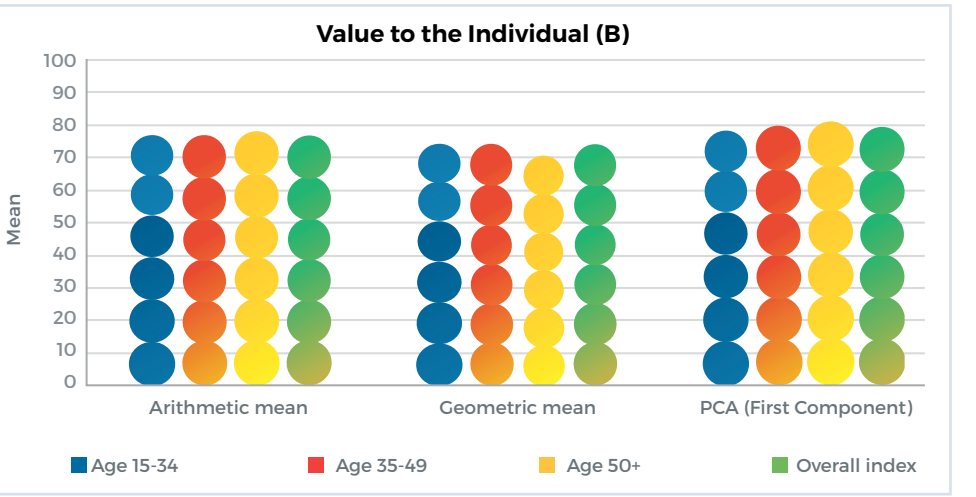
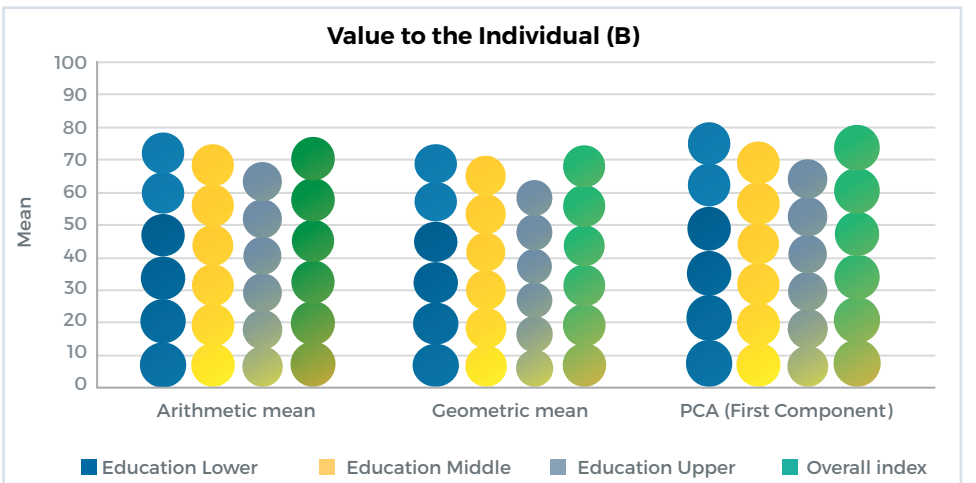


Figure F3: GIVE dimension scores used for education attainment aggregation methods



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Endnote

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78 See Table A3 in Appendix B.
79 Please refer to Appendix B for more details on the estimation procedure.
80 The modelling approach behind the ILO Modelled Estimates series is explained in more detail in Appendix B.
81 Please refer to Appendix B for a description of the data and sources for the explanatory variables included in the model.
82 Alternative estimates of volunteer rates calculated as averages over different time horizons are presented in Table A5 in Appendix B.
83 All estimates of volunteer rates presented in this chapter can be interpreted as the average percentage of the working-age population that engages in volunteer work during any four-week period of a year.
84 This was particularly explored in an ILO and UNV technical paper exploring the case study of Bangladesh by employing labour force survey (LFS) and time-use survey (TUS) data to explore volunteer work and unpaid care work (see Barford and others, 2024).
85 The 2022 SWVR presented an estimated global volunteer rate of 14.9 per cent on a four-week reference period, for a total of 862 million people estimated to engage in volunteer work globally (see UNV, 2021).
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148 See also Case Study Box 6.4 in chapter 6.
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The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR) presents new evidence on how volunteer measurement must evolve to capture the role of volunteers in global development. Each month, an estimated 2.1 billion people volunteer—an immense resource that is often overlooked. *The SWVR 2026* demonstrates that relying on existing measures, such as hours and monetary value, is not enough to justify investment or inform good policy. To address this fragmented evidence base, the Report introduces the new **Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE).** The GIVE is a multidimensional metric built on four equal dimensions: Value to the Individual, Value to the Community, Economic Value and the Enabling Environment. It is designed to offer a unified yet adaptable assessment of volunteering's impact.

We need to redefine how we value and track contributions by embracing measurement as a collective responsibility for all stakeholders. This will unlock investment, strengthen policy and help mobilize human solidarity as the world builds forward better. The Report offers timely insight into the crucial role accurate, systematic measurement will play. This is especially important during the **International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development in 2026.**

UN VOLUNTEERS