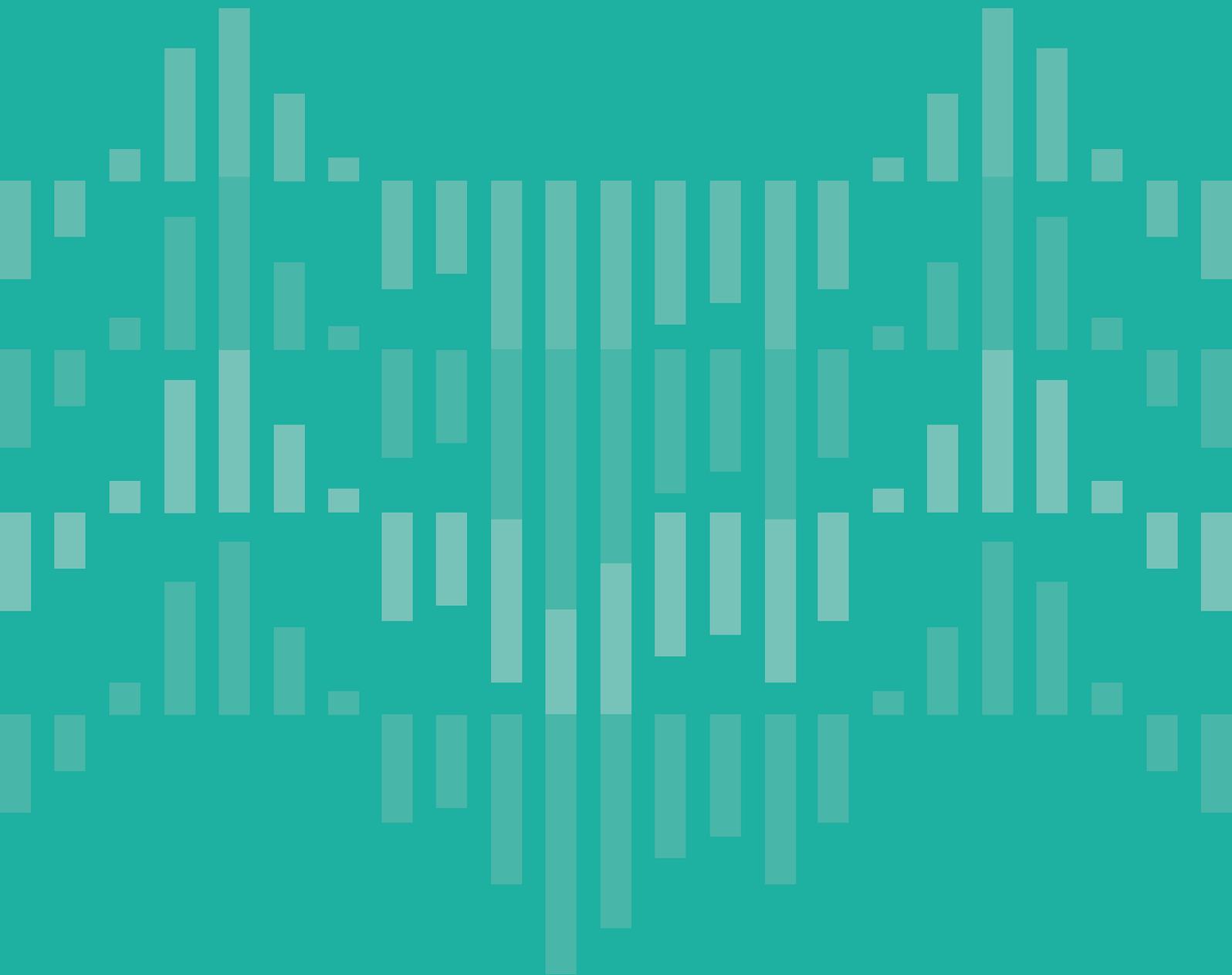


# INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING: TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Anna Barford, Vipasana Karkee and Niall O'Higgins







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# ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<b>CATI</b>	Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing
<b>ICLS</b>	International Conference of Labour Statisticians
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organization
<b>ISCED</b>	International Standard Classification of Education
<b>NEET</b>	Not in Education, Employment or Training
<b>UNV</b>	United Nations Volunteers

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Overview

Almost seventy per cent of all volunteering is direct and informal, yet this form of work remains under researched and poorly understood (UNV 2018, 2026). The meaning of the term “informal volunteering” is not intuitive and many people doing this work do not consider themselves to be volunteers. Nevertheless, given its magnitude and contribution, it is important to pay attention to this activity.

Informal volunteer work encompasses primarily activities which are undertaken directly, that is organized and carried out person-to-person, but some informal volunteer work is undertaken through registered or unregistered organizations. Direct informal volunteer work is by far the most common form of informal volunteer work (and is indeed the predominant form of volunteer work as a whole); it is also the least well understood. This is due to challenges in visibility, definitions, methods and priorities. Insufficient data impacts how well we understand its forms, functions, benefits and challenges.

In response to these knowledge and evidence gaps, direct informal volunteer work is the focus of this report. The report comprises a literature review combined with findings on informal volunteering from an eight-country survey on volunteer work commissioned by United Nations Volunteers (UNV) between March and May 2025. The countries surveyed were Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda.

## Characteristics of direct informal volunteers

Levels of informal and formal volunteer work vary considerably between countries. Descriptive statistics on overall volunteering rates range from below 30 to nearly 80 per cent among the eight countries surveyed here. Overall, volunteering rates reduce with age, driven by the fall in direct informal volunteering. Younger and older direct informal volunteers spend more time volunteering informally than prime age adults, especially among men.

Gender alone does not significantly influence overall engagement in volunteer work. However, the intersection of gender with other demographic characteristics plays a crucial role in shaping volunteering patterns. Women tend to volunteer less when they are engaged in unpaid care within their homes or when they are living with disabilities. Furthermore, women with lower levels of education are statistically significantly more likely than their male counterparts to participate in direct informal volunteer work.

Women and men with higher education levels or higher economic status are more likely to volunteer compared to their less-educated or less-advantaged counterparts. Moreover, men who are still in education are more likely to engage in formal volunteer work rather than direct informal volunteer work. In contrast, younger and older men tend to dedicate more time to direct informal volunteer work, while men in the 25-44 age group participate less in this type of volunteering.

Family income has a weaker and more varied relationship with direct informal volunteer work than formal volunteer work. In some countries informal volunteer work increases with family income while in others it falls and in yet others there is no obvious relationship. Being out of work does influence direct informal volunteer work, as people whose primary activity is seeking work and retired women rank among those most likely to be engaged in informal volunteer work.

Other important factors influencing volunteer work include disability and location. People with disabilities or long-term illnesses have the lowest rates of engagement in direct informal volunteer work. Meanwhile, the impact of living in rural areas versus urban areas on direct informal volunteer work varies significantly across countries. There is an almost 20 percentage point difference in China between rural and urban areas, yet no significant difference in Nigeria.

### Drivers and impacts of direct informal volunteer work

The UNV survey and literature review found that while direct informal volunteer work is primarily about reciprocal support provided by members of a community (“getting by”), formal volunteer work is more likely to also involve some element of personal advancement (“getting on”). Skills development and improved employment prospects are less of a motivation among direct informal volunteers.

Meeting needs is an important driver of direct informal and formal volunteer work alike. Direct informal volunteer work, typically from within a community or network, benefits from responsiveness and availability which may be harder to achieve with some forms of organization-based volunteering. Informal volunteering can also reinforce social cohesion. Such volunteering can be particularly needed where state services and social protection are limited.

The literature review found that direct informal volunteering is characterized by a short “psychological distance” between the volunteer and the so-called beneficiaries. As such, informal volunteers often see the impact of their work first-hand. Furthermore, because informal volunteering is usually interpersonal and is not mediated by any structures, the volunteer typically retains their sense of agency.

Some forms of direct informal volunteer work are associated with reciprocity, solidarity and mutuality. This volunteer work is rooted in social connectivity and may be associated with an agenda for change.

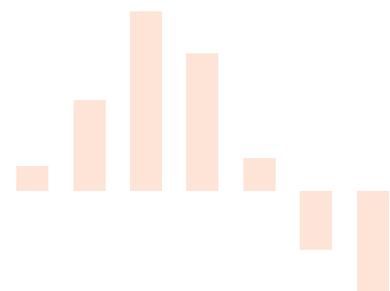
### Looking ahead

Going forward, several interventions could be instrumental in better understanding and supporting direct informal volunteer work. Diverse agencies can play a role in progressing this agenda, including universities (especially in the Global South), governments (including statistical offices, policymakers and ministries), United Nations entities and volunteer organizations. Importantly, direct informal volunteers must be equitably involved in these efforts so that research and support are well-aligned with their experiences, understandings and needs.

Key opportunities for stakeholders to further understand and recognize informal volunteers include:

- ▶▶ **National statistical offices: develop and use nationally appropriate and context-specific questions to measure informal volunteering.** Data collection using labour-force surveys and time use surveys, which allow disaggregation by gender, age, race, disability, location and income, as well as by activity type, could deepen and broaden the understanding of direct informal volunteer work.
- ▶▶ **Local, regional and national policymakers: work towards appropriately recognizing direct informal volunteer work as a legitimate form of civic engagement.** This requires greater attention to be paid to informal volunteering within wider conversations about volunteering, alongside work to develop strong legal definitions of informal volunteering. Together, this can help to create an enabling environment to strengthen and support this form of unpaid work. Direct informal volunteer work can be included within national volunteer strategies, work policies and other policies. Community ownership of informal volunteer work should be protected, while avoiding relying upon volunteers to substitute for public services.

- ▶▶ **Ministries of education, training and work: recognize the importance of direct informal volunteer work as a form of learning and work experience.** This valuing of informal volunteer work is already taking place in countries including Bahrain, Germany, Ireland, Lebanon and Türkiye.
- ▶▶ **Academia and researchers: to be enabled and supported to research informal volunteers' experiences in middle- and lower-income countries.** This entails greater research into informal volunteering in these contexts, as well as enabling researchers from middle- and lower- income countries to bring national perspectives to this work. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods offers the potential to understand patterns, scale, meanings, experiences and contextual details of informal volunteering. Qualitative approaches, co-research and volunteer advisory boards can be used to ground research in locally relevant concepts.
- ▶▶ **UN entities: initiate and nurture an international network of research organizations focused on progressing research on direct informal volunteer work across diverse settings.** This effort should involve researchers from universities, NGOs and beyond. In parallel, UN entities can support national statistical offices to measure direct informal volunteer work. UNV and the International Labour Organization (ILO) can also continue to curate informal volunteering research.
- ▶▶ **Volunteer organizations: complement and learn from informal volunteering.** In some circumstances informal volunteering brings a sense of closeness and belonging which enhances engagement for those involved. Some formal volunteering organizations are already emulating this by boosting relationality and flexibility. Further, volunteer organizations could find ways to strengthen community engagement which could enable and support informal volunteer work.
- ▶▶ **Informal volunteers: voice their experiences and needs, find time to respond to surveys, act as expert advisers or co-researchers and otherwise engage with efforts to understand and support their unpaid work.** If informal volunteers were to engage in the narration and documentation of their experiences, this could help to deepen understandings of what this work involves.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 A widespread yet overlooked form of work

Globally, around 2.1 billion people – around 34.5 per cent of the working age population – do some volunteering work each month (UNV, 2026, 43). Almost seventy per cent of all volunteer work is direct and informal (UNV 2026, 48). The remaining 30 per cent is performed via organizations, associations and groups. Despite accounting for the majority of volunteering work, informal – and above all direct informal – volunteering remains understudied (Barford, Brockie and O’Higgins 2024, 11; Einolf *et al.* 2016, 223).

This report examines informal volunteer work, primarily focusing on direct informal volunteer work, in other words person-to-person volunteer work not mediated by any organization. It seeks to address gaps in evidence and to improve our understanding of this often-overlooked activity. In doing so, we identify several barriers to direct informal volunteer work, specifically around conceptualizations, methods and delegitimation.

The next section discusses in more detail and with some precision the relevant definitions of volunteer work applied here, based primarily on the work of the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS). However, for many people as the concept of informal volunteer work is not intuitive. The everyday nature of interpersonal support in the form of friendship, neighbourliness, helpfulness, solidarity and collective spirit can mean that people do not recognize their own activities as direct informal volunteer work. To help volunteers to distinguish between formal and informal varieties of volunteering, researchers have sought alternative terms to translate statistical concepts into familiar language. In Uganda, the terms “programmed” and “everyday” volunteering were adopted (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022).

This research in Uganda shows the importance of grounding volunteering concepts in local realities, particularly as this impacts data collection, evidence, policy and practice:

Stakeholders often identified volunteering as a practice associated with organisations such as NGOs and ministries, and that everyday forms of voluntary labour cannot really be understood as volunteering. This means that historical forms of volunteering in Uganda and the region may be being sidelined and silenced by a focus on forms that fit with global North norms and expectations. This is particularly significant if these forms of volunteering are more important to vulnerable communities outside urban settings, unable to access more programmed approaches. (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022, 37).

Informal volunteer work often involves everyday interactions within a community (Dean 2022, 537), as opposed to being a formal act of service (UNV 2020). The community-based and often reciprocal nature of informal volunteer work requires a move away from the traditional volunteering focus on “givers” and “receivers”. Instead, people help each other in shared struggles against inequality (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022, 37-38). Thus, direct informal volunteer work may achieve something quite distinct from formal volunteer work, being more of an everyday activity (UNV 2020, 7) which is often rooted in community solidarity.

In contrast to formal volunteer work, there are “notable gaps” in research on informal volunteers (Wang *et al.* 2022). The attention given to formal volunteer work – in research and beyond – stems from organizational support, branding and rewards, including financial ones. These elements are often absent from informal volunteer work. There is also a bias towards research on formal volunteers from high-income countries, while volunteers from marginalized communities, including in the Global South, are often overlooked (Baillie Smith, Fadel *et al.* 2022).

Informal volunteer work is often devalued by those who are not directly involved, in part because of its association with marginalized communities. Groups which are traditionally excluded or discriminated against – such as women, people on low incomes and racial minorities – tend to participate more in informal volunteering (Dean 2022). Local volunteers in countries of the Global South are less researched than Global North volunteers who volunteer internationally (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022). Volunteer work that is not “middle-class” and “Western” is too easily overlooked by public, academic and nonprofit sectors (Dean 2022; Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022). In this way, inequalities detract from wider recognition of the unpaid work carried out by marginalized groups.

Given how much research “excludes the rich legacy of informal helping and mutual aid that sustains well-being in many marginalized communities” (Benenson and Stagg, 2016, 133S), this report aims to bring informal volunteering into sharper focus. It comes in response to wider calls to pay more attention to informal volunteering, including how it is defined, valued and operationalized in policy, its immediate and longer-term societal contributions and the experience of volunteers (Dean 2022; Barford, Brockie and O’Higgins 2024). This analysis forms part of UNV and ILO efforts to measure volunteer work and aims to deepen understandings of direct informal volunteering. As we will see, both individuals and society significantly benefit from informal volunteering.

## 1.2 Defining direct informal volunteering

The 19th ICLS,<sup>1</sup> convened by the ILO in 2013, established a definition of volunteering in both its informal and formal forms (see Box 1). Specifically, persons in volunteer work were defined as “all those of working age who, during a short reference period, performed any unpaid, non-compulsory activity to produce goods or provide services for others” either through an organization or directly for others outside the volunteer’s own household (ILO 2013, 13).

<sup>1</sup> The definition of volunteer work was established in 19th ICLS Resolution I: Resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization in 2013 and was retained when the resolution was amended in 2023 and renamed Resolution II: Resolution to amend the 19th ICLS resolution concerning statistics of work, employment and labour underutilization.

## Box 1: Defining volunteer work and volunteering

### Volunteer work

**Volunteer work** comprises “non-compulsory work performed for others without pay” (ICLS, 2013, 4). Where:

- ▶ **“work”** means any production of goods or provision of services
- ▶ **“non-compulsory”** means people must engage in volunteer work willingly, without civil, legal or administrative requirement and without being forced
- ▶ **“others”** refers to the beneficiaries of goods and services and can be all types of organizations, institutions or businesses (formal or informal) or individuals who are not members of the volunteer’s household or family.
- ▶ **“without pay”** means that volunteers have no expectation of receiving payment for time worked or work done, whether in cash or in-kind.

**Note:** compensation of costs related to participation in voluntary activities (e.g. transportation, accommodation, meals) and stipends are not considered payment, as these facilitate engagement. Stipends higher than one-third of local wages mean work are considered to be paid (and therefore not voluntary).

**To measure volunteer work**, the 19th ICLS specifies that:

- ▶ the appropriate reference period is four weeks.
- ▶ the volunteer should be engaged in the activity for at least one hour during the reference period for it to be counted as volunteer work.

### Volunteering

Volunteering, volunteerism and voluntary activities are a more broadly defined set of concepts than “volunteer work”. The United Nations (2002) defines these 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.”
- ▶ an example of a voluntary activity which is not volunteer work is giving blood without being paid.

Sources: ILO 2025; ILO 2013, 4, 13-14; ILO 2021; United Nations 2002.

Direct volunteer work, which is by definition informal, comprises activities for “households other than the household of the volunteer worker or of related family members”, whereas “organization-based” volunteering includes volunteering which takes place “through, or for organizations comprising market and non-market units including through or for self-help, mutual aid or community-based groups of which the volunteer is a member.” (ILO 2023, 12; see Box 2). Direct volunteer work occurs between individuals rather than through groups or organizations. Dean describes this informality as “the unstructured giving of one’s time to help friends, neighbors, or community” (Dean 2022, 527). Conversely, formal volunteering often occurs via organizations and associations (UNV 2018).

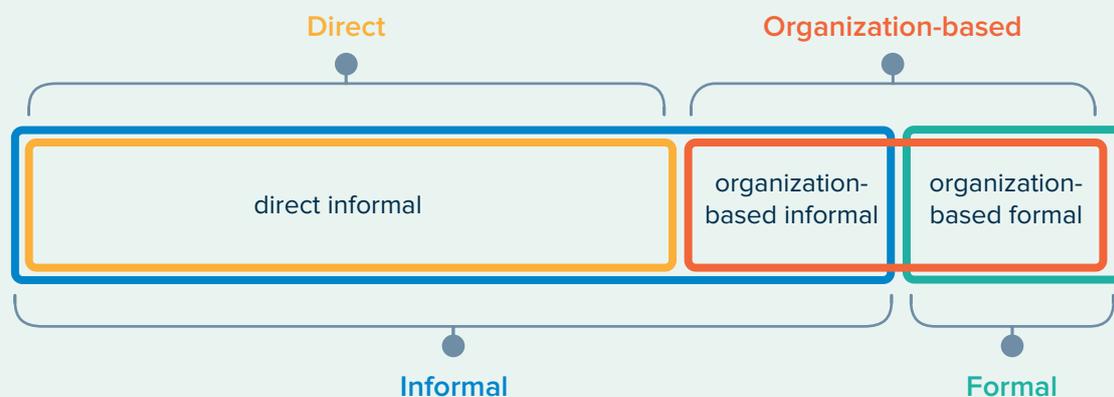
### Box 2: Core definitions – direct, organization-based, informal and formal volunteering

One initial obstacle to obtaining a clearer understanding of different forms of volunteer work, their characteristics and determinants, is the lack of uniformity in the use of terms in the literature. This has been at least partially resolved by the introduction of a formal statistical definition of informal volunteering at the most recent International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) hosted by the ILO in 2023. The same ICLS specified that volunteering is unpaid non-compulsory work done for the benefit of others.

As of 2023, two sets of binary distinctions are used to define volunteer work. These are (a) direct versus organization-based, and (b) formal versus informal. Although in the literature these terms are often conflated and blurred, the internationally agreed definitions are:

- ▶ **Direct volunteer work** is for other individuals or households without an intermediary organization
- ▶ **Organization-based volunteer work** is when the activity is intermediated by any form of organization (whether formal or informal)
- ▶ **Informal volunteer work** either occurs directly within communities on a person-to-person basis, or occurs through informal structures or organizations
- ▶ **Formal volunteer work** occurs through formal institutions or structures

While all direct volunteer work is informal volunteer work, the converse is not true. Informal volunteer work comprises all direct volunteer work plus any organization-based volunteer work done through informal structures. Thus, three forms of volunteer work exist in practice, these are: (i) direct informal; (ii) organization-based informal and (iii) organization-based formal.



This paper **focuses on direct informal volunteer work** for several reasons:

- a) Global and national statistics on volunteer work do not report formal and informal volunteer work separately but do identify direct volunteering as a distinct category. Focusing on direct informal volunteer work facilitates comparisons between our results and the wider literature.
- b) Direct informal volunteer work is the main form of volunteering work. Direct volunteer work, which is always informal, makes up around 80 per cent of all informal volunteer work, and informal volunteer work makes up over 70 per cent of all volunteer work.
- c) Focusing on direct informal volunteer work allows for definitional and statistical clarity in what is an already complex field with many blurred boundaries.

Before confining our attention more exclusively to direct volunteer work, it is helpful to discuss briefly what its counterpart, “organization-based” volunteer work, comprises. The organizations covered include NGOs, corporations, cooperatives, government entities and community-level groups, even those which are convened only briefly to achieve a particular goal such as repairing a road or digging a well (ILO 2011; see Table 1). Transient and small-scale structures are a form of organization which is typically informal. Volunteering activities without any form or wider structure are considered to be direct (all direct volunteer work is, by definition, informal because person-to-person arrangements are not considered to be formal structures or organizations).

**Table 1:** Organizations involved with formal volunteer work

Organization types	Description
<b>Non-profit institutions</b> <i>e.g. private hospitals, soup kitchens, religious bodies, NGOs</i>	<b>Institutionalized units that are:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶▶ institutionally separate from government</li> <li>▶▶ do not return any profits to their owners or directors</li> <li>▶▶ self-governing so control their own activities</li> <li>▶▶ involve a meaningful degree of freely chosen participation</li> </ul>
<b>For-profit entities engaged in market production</b> <i>e.g. partnerships, cooperatives, quasi corporations, limited liability partnerships</i>	<b>Corporations are:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶▶ capable of generating a profit or other financial gain</li> <li>▶▶ separate legal entities from their owners who have limited liability</li> <li>▶▶ set up for purposes of engaging in market production</li> </ul> <b>Unincorporated business are:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶▶ informal businesses; or</li> <li>▶▶ other households engaged in market production.</li> </ul>
<b>Government units</b> <i>e.g. local or national government</i>	“legal entities established by political processes which have legislative, judicial or executive authority over other institutional units within a given area” (United Nations <i>et al.</i> 2008, para. 4.9).

Source: Based on ILO, 2011, p.29 which draws upon United Nations *et al.*, 2008.

The person-to-person nature of direct informal volunteer work is, in part, what places it “under the radar”. Activities such as helping an elderly neighbour with their shopping or watching a friend’s child for an hour typically go unnoticed beyond those who are involved. In many societies, “helping out” in this way is culturally expected, so not really seen as volunteer work (see Box 3). The ILO explains how survey “respondents may not recognize their own acts as something special or distinctive called “volunteer work”, as opposed to being simply a normal part of life in the community.” (ILO 2011, 11). One research project in the Indian Sundarbans created a game to encourage participants to think about the types of volunteer work they do in response to climate change (VOCAD, no date). Another project in Uganda, mentioned above, identified other terms to describe these activities, drawing upon the perspective of volunteers, to helpfully build cross-cultural understandings of volunteer work (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022).

### Box 3: Examples of informal volunteering activities

**Informal volunteering includes activities such as:**

- ▶▶ childcare
- ▶▶ adult care (physical care of adult)
- ▶▶ cooking meals
- ▶▶ doing household repairs and renovations
- ▶▶ giving directions
- ▶▶ listening to a friend’s problems
- ▶▶ giving advice
- ▶▶ helping someone move house
- ▶▶ taking care of animals or pets
- ▶▶ doing others’ housework and gardening
- ▶▶ driving to appointments
- ▶▶ visiting an elderly neighbour
- ▶▶ sharing posts online
- ▶▶ raising awareness of social issues online
- ▶▶ helping with shopping and services
- ▶▶ helping with work and farming
- ▶▶ collecting the post if someone is away
- ▶▶ befriending a neighbour’s children

**Note:** many of these examples of informal volunteering also constitute unpaid care work. Sources: Dean, 2022; Egerton and Mullan 2008; Einolf *et al.* 2016; Finkelstein and Brannick 2007; Ihm 2017; Warburton and McLaughlin 2006.

To understand the diversity of volunteering, UNV produced a typology of volunteering in 1999 (see Figure 1). This typology relates informal volunteering to mutual aid and self-help, defined as “when people gather informally to meet a perceived need, either working together to address common needs or reciprocating support to each other or those in the same situation”. A 2020 update added that because these activities are so deeply embedded within community practices, many informal volunteers wouldn’t see themselves as such (UNV 2020, 12). This speaks both to the normalization of helping and to the challenges of researching something where cultural understandings diverge from international statistical definitions.

**Figure 1:** A typology volunteering and formality



**Note:** these types, set out in a report commissioned for the Global Technical Meeting on Volunteering in 2020, are understood to overlap. The first four were set out in 1999 and the fifth was adopted in 2020. Source: UNV. 2020, p.16.

The above discussion focuses on person-to-person, or direct, engagement. It is important to note that direct informal volunteer is not performed exclusively in person. Online volunteering can be direct and informal, as being online can allow the public to engage autonomously and person-to-person (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Meanwhile, other informal online volunteer work, such as sharing posts and raising awareness of social issues (Ihm 2017), would likely be considered informal organization-based volunteering because online organizing convenes groups in sometimes informal and transient ways.

Mutuality and reciprocity, sometimes as part of a political agenda to tackle inequalities and disadvantage, play an important role in some forms of informal volunteer work. This can be in the form of direct or organization-based volunteer work. The political foundations of mutual aid – as seeking change – are often overlooked in public discussions and regularly misconstrued as “charity” (Reese and Johnson 2022). Research from Uganda identifies the need to understand volunteering in relation to “struggles against inequality and vulnerability”, moving away from “traditional ‘giver’ and ‘receiver’ dichotomies” (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022, 37-38). In reality, a lot of informal volunteering is reciprocal and provides mutual assistance. Reciprocity may mean that not participating results in loss of status and friendships or even ostracization (Einolf *et al.* 2016).

Just as informal volunteering can have an agenda for change, change is needed to adjust the understanding and recognition of direct informal volunteering and its role in societies and social reproduction. As we shall see, informal volunteering plays a critical role in many disadvantaged communities. However, its relative “invisibility” for those who are not immediately involved and even for those who are, can delegitimize activities which enable individuals and communities to get by (Dean 2022). We seek to contribute to the “core work of inclusion, representation, and the politics of legitimacy” (Dean 2022, 532) by using established concepts and definitions to reliably measure direct informal volunteer work.

### 1.3 The survey on volunteer work in eight countries

The analysis reported here is based on a volunteer work survey commissioned by UNV in 2025, spanning eight countries across the Global South, namely Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. In these countries, which make up 42 per cent of the world’s working-age population and 52 per cent of the world’s low- and middle-income working-age population, no standardized data on volunteer work is currently available.

The survey employed a harmonized, culturally adapted questionnaire based on the official volunteer work survey module developed by the ILO and UNV (ILO 2021) and included questions capturing the prevalence, characteristics and organization of volunteer activities over a 30-day reference period.<sup>2</sup> Two additional questions explore common barriers and motivators to volunteering.

Data were collected through Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) of nationally representative samples of 1,000 respondents per country. National samples were stratified by gender, age and subnational geography. However, it is important to remember that because this research was telephone-based, populations with low telephone coverage are likely to be under-represented. Interviews were conducted in each country between March and May 2025.

The UNV survey and the analysis presented here are based on the international definition of volunteer work established by the 19th ICLS in 2013. In this, volunteer work comprises “non-compulsory work performed for others without pay”. Anyone of working age who engaged in volunteer work for at least one hour during the past 30 days was considered to be a volunteer (see Box 1).

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<sup>2</sup> This survey, designed closely following the ILO Volunteer work measurement guide, asks respondents a series of questions in accessible language, leaving data producers to accurately identify volunteer work and its types following international standards.

## 1.4 Report overview

This study aims to research a widespread yet overlooked form of work, while engaging with the nuances and specificities of direct informal volunteering. In particular, this study seeks to:

- a) identify patterns in direct informal volunteer work across different regions, demographics and socioeconomic contexts
- b) understand what drives individuals to engage in direct informal volunteer work and the challenges they face
- c) examine how direct informal volunteer work contributes to social and economic development, particularly in relation to employment, skills development, social cohesion and social protection
- d) provide insights into how governments and international organizations can recognize and support direct informal volunteer work

This report is written for a diverse audience, ranging from policymakers to UN entities, statisticians and other researchers, as well as students and volunteers themselves.

*Section 2* describes key characteristics of direct informal volunteer work based on new statistical analyses and the wider literature. The analysis looks at spatial patterns, including country-specific differences and distinctions between rural and urban areas. It then examines demographic patterns, considering factors like gender, age, education and income. Throughout this section, organization-based volunteering is used as a point of comparison to highlight the similarities and divergences between the two forms of volunteer work.

*Section 3* addresses the reasons why individuals engage in direct informal volunteer work, their experiences of it and the benefits they derive from it. The analysis combines new statistical findings with existing literature on informal volunteering, noting that most of the available literature documents experiences in high-income countries.

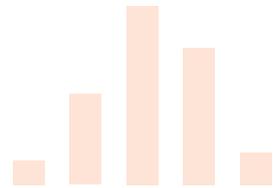
*Section 4* offers a conclusion and presents recommendations for key actors whose work relates to direct informal volunteer work.



## 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF INFORMAL VOLUNTEERING

### 2.1 Geographies of informal volunteering

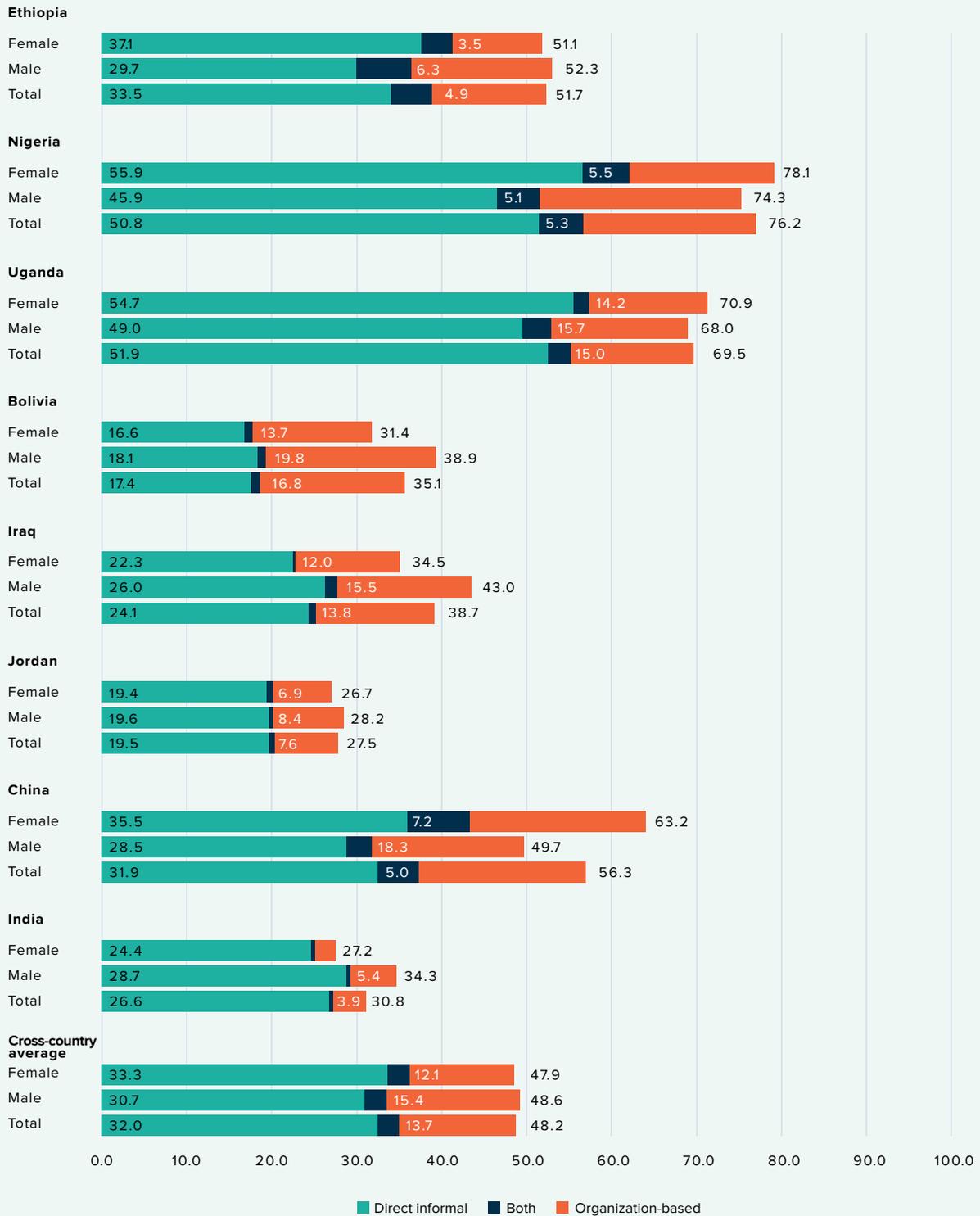
Patterns of volunteering vary widely across countries, although some regularities can be observed. As noted above, many more people are involved in direct informal volunteer work than in other forms of volunteer work (UNV 2026). This pattern also clearly emerges from our eight-country sample (see Figure 2). When considered as a whole, around half of the working age population is involved in volunteer work and a little over 70 per cent of them, as with the previous estimates, are involved in direct informal volunteer work.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> This includes those who are simultaneously undertaking direct and informal organization-based volunteer work.

**Figure 2:** Share of the working-age population engaged in direct informal and/or organization-based volunteer work by gender, 2025

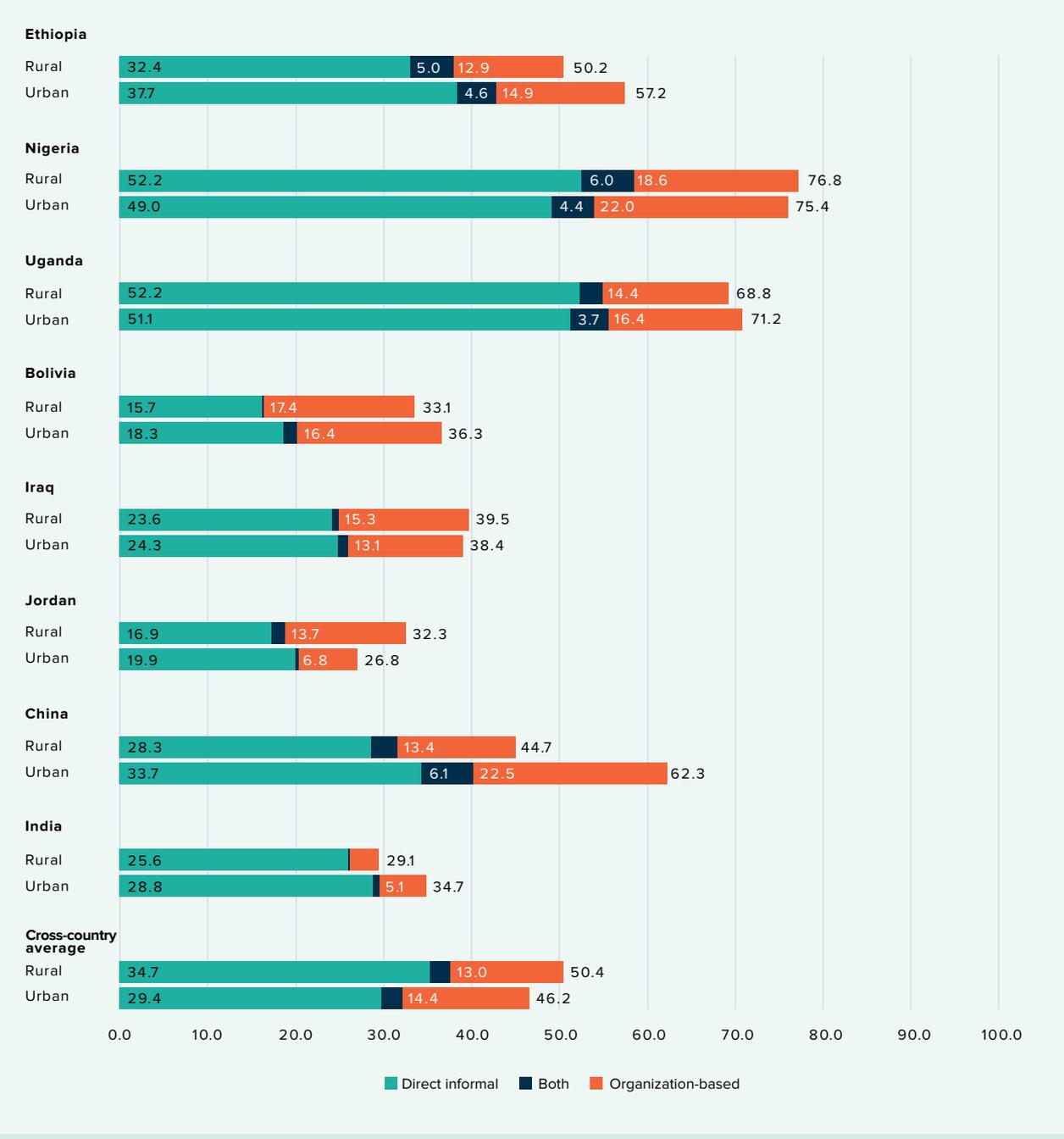


**Note:** Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

Involvement in the different forms of volunteer work varies quite markedly between and within countries. Across countries, volunteer work rates vary from under 30 per cent in Jordan to nearly 80 per cent in Nigeria. Broadly speaking, of the countries surveyed, volunteer work rates are highest in the three African countries and relatively low in the countries of Latin America and the Arab States, while the Asian countries surveyed lie somewhere in the middle. At around 90 per cent, the share of direct informal volunteer work is highest in India, especially among women. As well as having high overall rates of volunteer involvement, the African countries in this analysis also boast a relatively high share of direct informal volunteer work, consistently comprising between 70 and 80 per cent of volunteers.

In terms of the distribution of volunteer work within countries, volunteer work in general and direct informal volunteer work in particular seems to be a little more predominant in rural areas compared to urban ones. This could, in part, be due to rural areas having less access to formal services and infrastructure, rendering people more reliant upon one another to fill this gap where possible. However, the pattern varies significantly across countries and regions (see Figure 3). In the two Asian countries surveyed, China and India, both informal and formal volunteer work are more extensive in urban areas, whereas in the Arab States countries, Iraq and Jordan, the opposite is true. Elsewhere the pattern is more mixed.

**Figure 3:** Share of the working-age population engaged in direct informal and/or organization-based volunteer work by geographic location, 2025



**Note:** Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

This spatial patterning of volunteer activity suggests that the drivers for and barriers to direct informal volunteer work vary by location. One study of volunteering in the context of a protracted crisis in Burundi identified how the local context influences what volunteer work takes place and how. The type of volunteer work varied between the rural hills and urban areas depending on the vulnerabilities and needs of people in each place (Fadel 2022). Cultural and legal factors also influence the visibility of and support for informal volunteer work (see Box 4).

We now turn to the demographics of informal volunteering in order to better understand who carries out this form of unpaid work.

#### Box 4: Legal and cultural factors shaping visibility and support for informal volunteer work

The visibility of and wider support for direct informal volunteering can be minimal. In part, this could be attributed to a widespread cultural understanding of direct informal volunteer work being an expected way of fulfilling one's social duty. This could render this form of work unremarkable and consequently overlooked. Important cultural factors include:

- ▶▶ Gendered roles around the unpaid provision of help and care combined with gender biases in which forms of work have wider visibility
- ▶▶ Religious cultural practices of informal support
- ▶▶ A sense of duty to help and care

A study of several European countries found that state regulations and guidelines insufficiently differentiate between informal and formal volunteers. This compromises clarity and can cause confusion regarding the roles of volunteers, as in the case of a study of informal volunteer work in the wake of disasters.

A review of support and legal entitlement for informal carers within the European Union identified various forms of support, though these were not available everywhere. While much unpaid care work is performed within people's own homes so does not count as volunteering, the following support is also beneficial to direct informal volunteers engaged in care work:

- ▶▶ Financial support, e.g. including allowances and the legal entitlement to pension credits
- ▶▶ Counselling to reduce stress
- ▶▶ Information provision by health care professionals
- ▶▶ Respite care
- ▶▶ Training, e.g. on nutrition, mobility and daily living activities

Sources: Al Saffer *et al.* 2024; Gallant, Smale and Arai 2016; Lewis 2015; Nahkur *et al.* 2022; Courtin, Jemai and Mossialos 2014.

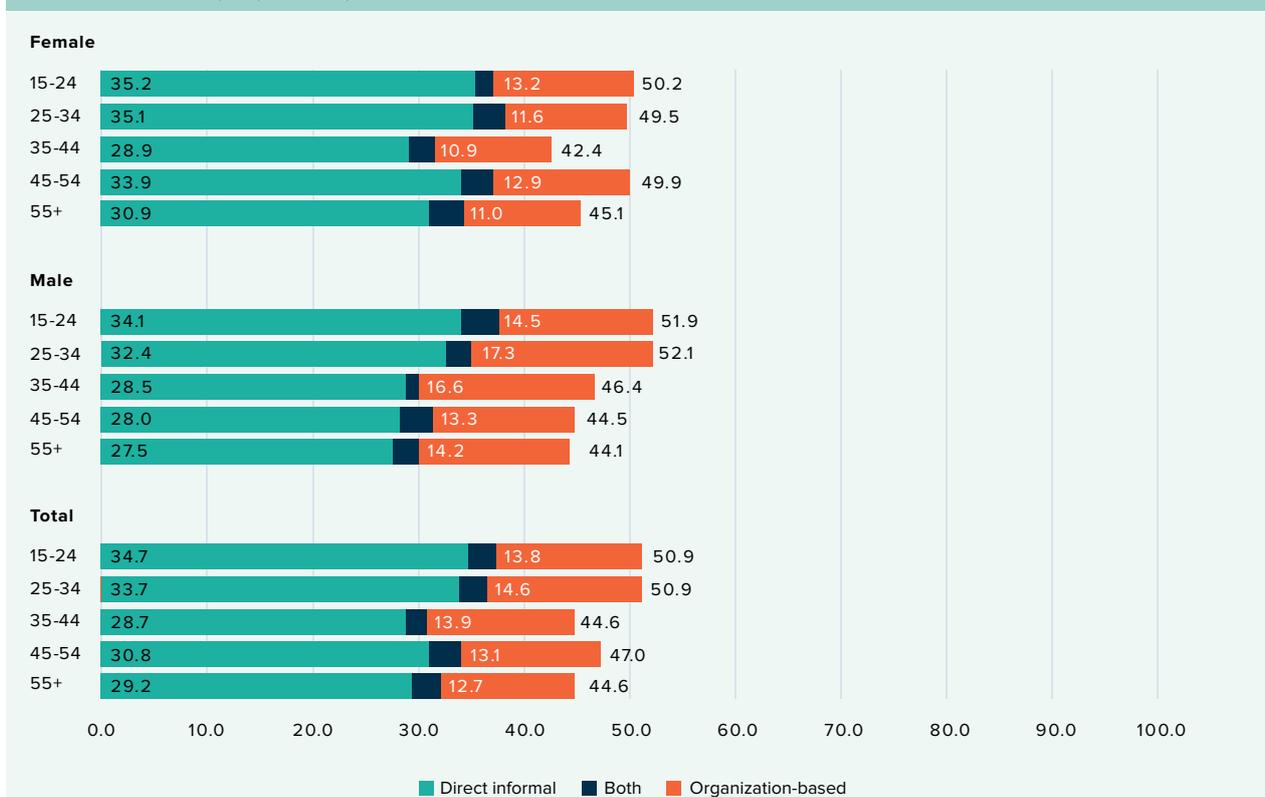
## 2.2 Demographics of informal volunteering

Overall, the share of women and men in volunteering is rather similar. However, on average across countries – and usually within individual countries - women are more likely than men to be engaged in direct informal volunteer work (see Figures 2 and 4). In practice, this often entails unpaid care work, in which women are disproportionately engaged (Barford, Brockie and O’Higgins 2024). As such, there is scope to usefully integrate direct informal volunteer work into policies on gender equality and social protection (Barford *et al.* 2024).

It is important to produce gender-disaggregated studies of volunteer work, including that which is informal and direct, in order to generate more evidence on the gendered nature of work (Barford *et al.* 2024). This can help to make visible women’s and girls’ contributions to solidarity and care, contributions which are often overlooked by patriarchal systems. More generally, as with other female-dominated forms of work, informal volunteering often has a low status and receives minimal practical support from outside the community (ILO 2024; UNV 2018). In Burundi, for example, wider gender hierarchies have been found to be reproduced within volunteer spaces (Fadel 2022).

Across the eight countries, volunteering rates tend to gradually fall with age, driven by reductions in direct informal volunteer work rates. This is especially marked among men, but to some extent is also visible among women (see Figure 4). We examine the reasons for this in Section 3, in our consideration of the drivers and barriers to volunteering.

**Figure 4:** Share of the working-age population engaged in direct informal and/or organization-based volunteer work by age and gender, 2025

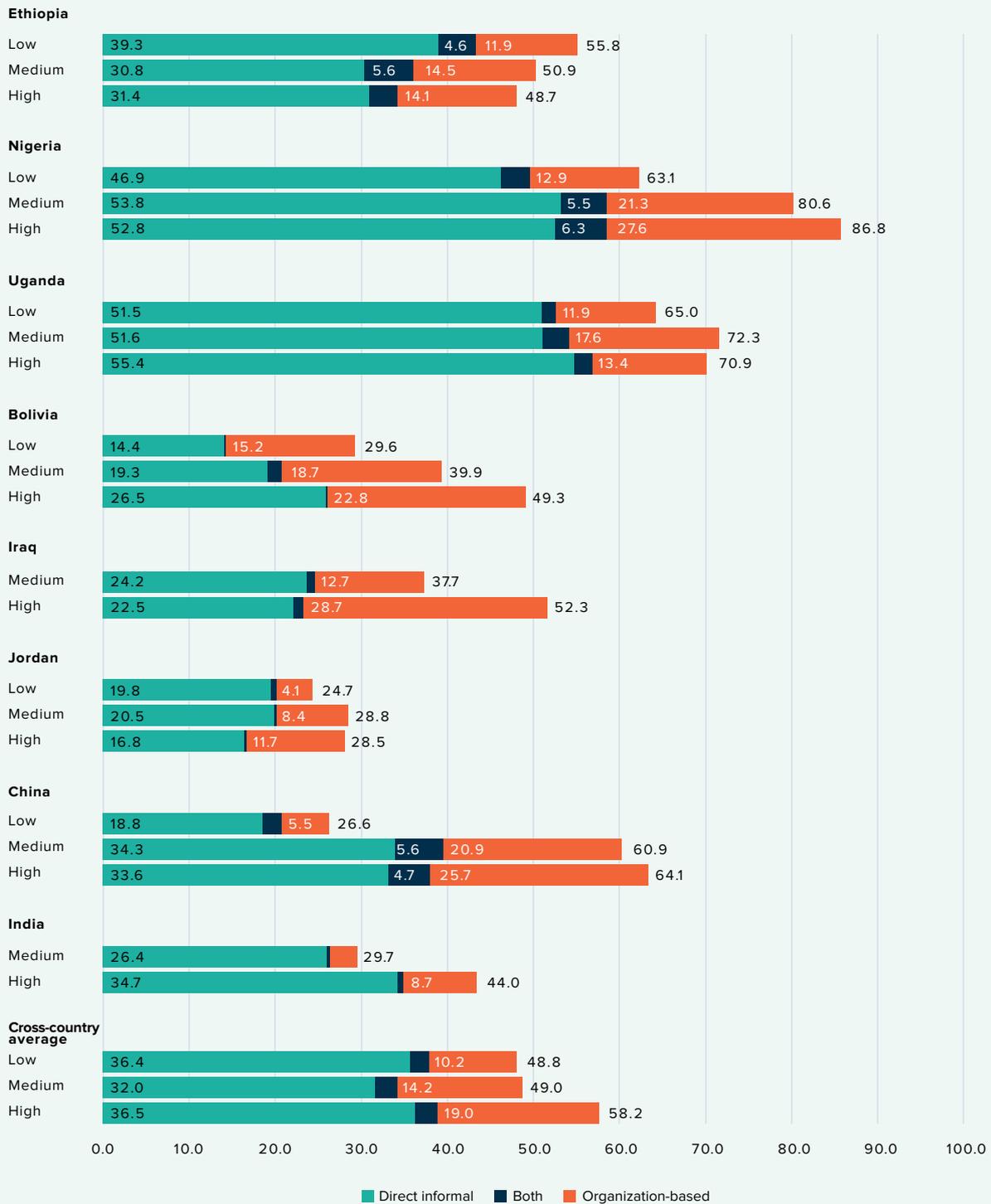


**Note:** Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

In the UNV survey, direct informal volunteer work shows no consistent relationship with income (see Figure 5). At the aggregate cross-country level, direct informal volunteering rates are almost the same at low and high family income levels at 38.6 per cent and 39.2, respectively (including those engaged in both forms of volunteering) with the medium family income category displaying the lowest rates of direct informal volunteer work. These averages include very divergent country level relationships between income and direct informal volunteer work. In some countries, direct informal volunteer work increases with family income while in others it falls and in some there is no obvious relationship. This suggests that informal volunteering is context specific (see Box 5). Section 3.2 focuses the role of income as a constraint upon direct informal volunteer work.

Meanwhile, formal volunteer work increases with family income. Across the eight countries, organization-based volunteering rates (including those involved in both forms of volunteering), almost double, moving from low to high levels of family income; from 12.6 per cent in the low-income group to 17.0 per cent among the middle-income category and 21.7 per cent among those with high levels of family income (see Figure 5). The same broad pattern exists at the country level.

**Figure 5:** Share of the working-age population engaged in direct informal and/or organization-based volunteer work by family income, 2025



**Note:** Survey data collected income ranges by local currency which the authors classified into low, medium and high categories by terciles. The low category in India and Iraq could not be sensibly defined and thus merged with medium income group. Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

**Box 5: International patterns: the cases of Japan and England**

Studies of Japan and England have found that while formal volunteering varies with social privilege, informal volunteering is more constant across social groups. In Japan, socioeconomic resources, including education, do not have a bearing on the likelihood that someone will volunteer informally. This contrasted with likelihood of formal volunteering which increased with higher levels of education. Similarly, an analysis of volunteering in England identified how formal volunteering is sensitive to and rises with social privilege (in this case measured in terms of deprivation). Meanwhile informal volunteering rates persisted at 26 and 27 per cent across the five quintiles of deprivation.

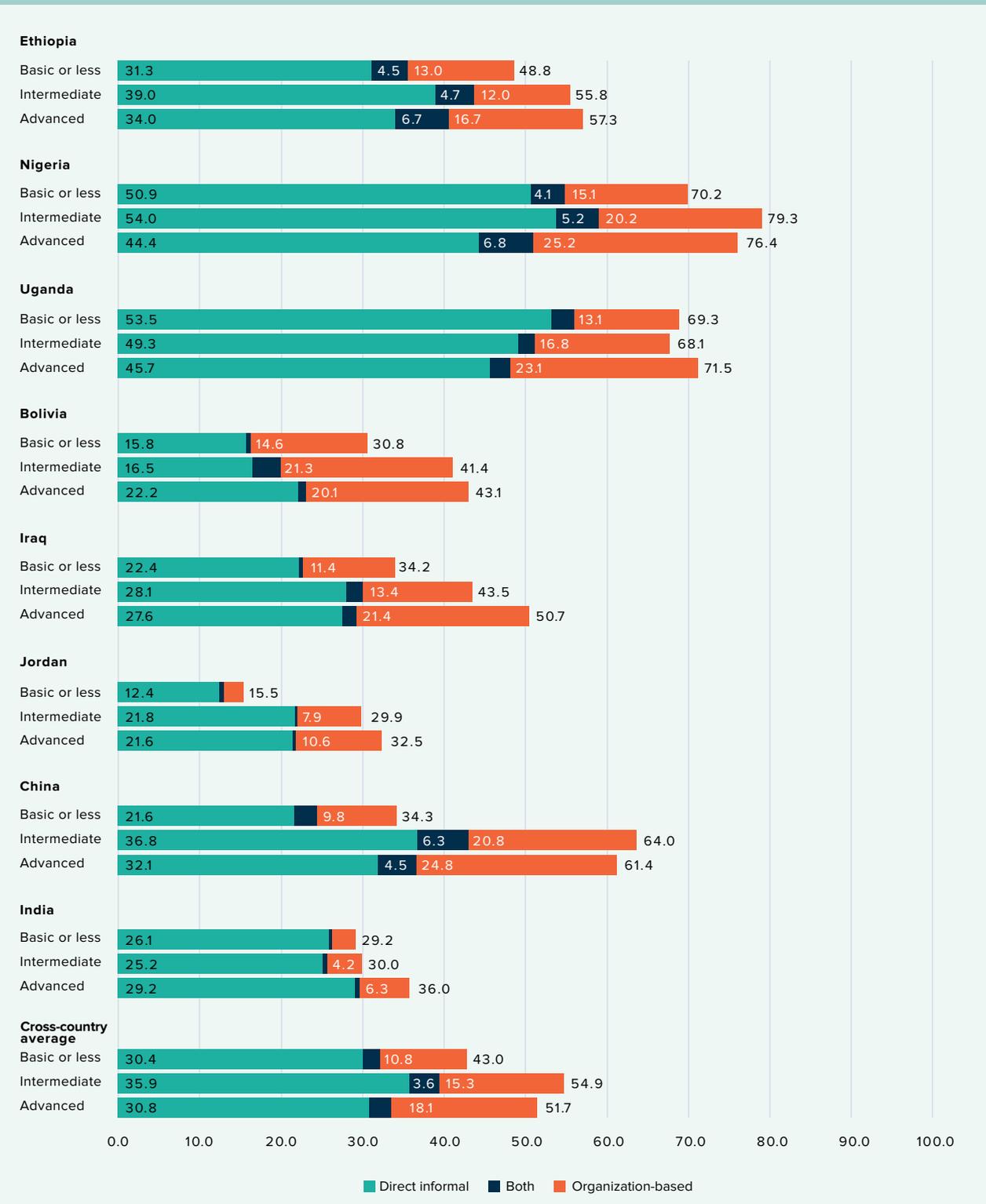
Sources: Mitani 2014; Dean 2022.

Volunteering rates by educational attainment show similar patterns to those related to income levels. Here too, the UNV survey data show that patterns of informal volunteering in relation to education vary across countries. Equally evident is a strong cross-country pattern of rates of formal volunteer work clearly increasing with educational attainment. This pattern is replicated rather uniformly at the individual country level (see Figure 6).

The broader literature offers some indications of how privilege, as reflected in educational attainment, relates to the type of volunteering in which people engage. In the United Kingdom, tertiary graduates are less involved with informal volunteering than those whose highest qualifications are below upper secondary level. The reverse was true for formal volunteering, with higher education positively related to formal volunteering (Egerton and Mullan 2008), as was the pattern found in the eight UNV survey countries.

Others have explained the positive relation between educational attainment and formal volunteering in high-income countries in terms of how spatial mobility, often for university and work, detaches middle-class people from their families and childhood communities. In this context, formal volunteering through organized groups offers a route for middle-class people in the high-income settings to meet people and form friendships in their new communities (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1987, in Egerton and Mullan 2008). More research is needed into the relationship between education and volunteering in lower-income countries.

**Figure 6:** Share of the working-age population engaged in direct informal and/or organization-based volunteer work by educational attainment, 2025



**Note:** Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. “Educational attainment” is defined here based on the ILO aggregation of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) designed to produce a simple classification of individual educational attainment which is comparable across countries. Broadly speaking: “basic or less” educational attainment corresponds to either no schooling or the completion of early childhood, primary or lower secondary education; “intermediate”, to the completion of upper secondary education; and “advanced”, to the completion of tertiary educational studies. Data source: UNV Survey.

## 2.3 Factors influencing volunteer work

To shed more light upon the factors associated with volunteer work, a further analysis was performed. Probit models<sup>4</sup> are used to understand the influence and relative importance of key factors upon volunteer work. These factors include country, location, gender, age, education, income and employment status. Probit models are calculated for males and females together and separately. Probit models estimate the determinants of:

- ▶▶ the probability of engaging in volunteer work as opposed to not doing so (see Table 2)
- ▶▶ the probability of engaging in direct informal volunteer work among all those engaged in organization-based formal volunteer work (see Table 3)

### 2.3.3 Determinants of volunteer work

Regarding the probability of volunteering in any form, the probit model results tend to confirm the analysis thus far (see Table 2). For example, the country fixed effects from Table 2 clearly reflect the higher prevalence of volunteering in the African countries studied, particularly in Nigeria and Uganda which reach almost 80 per cent, compared to a rather low prevalence of 30 per cent in Jordan.

The overall difference in volunteering between men and women can also be seen to be not statistically significant when gender is considered alone. However, gender combined with other factors does significantly influence people's volunteering activities.

Among women, the tendency to volunteer reduces when women are doing unpaid care work within their own homes and families or when women are living with disabilities or chronic illness. The greater involvement of the self-employed in volunteering can also be seen which, in this case, is more marked among men than women. This may reflect how the need for and tendency to engage in reciprocal mutual support is stronger among the self-employed and especially self-employed men.

The tendency of more educated people to volunteer also emerges strongly, especially for highly educated men. There is an estimated 10 percentage point difference in the likelihood of volunteering between tertiary and primary educated men, controlling for other factors. Similarly, the tendency to volunteer increases markedly with family income, again especially among men.

<sup>4</sup> The probit model is a widely used econometric tool applied to estimate the relationship between a series of explanatory variables and a binary dependent variable. The estimated model is non-linear and the modelled estimates reported here are in terms of the "marginal effects" of changes in explanatory variables on the likelihood of the outcome of interest being observed. Being non-linear, these "effects" vary across the probability distribution. In line with typical practice, we report marginal effects evaluated at the observed mean of the relevant outcome probability; specifically, the change in and the probability of volunteering (Table 2) and the probability of direct informal volunteering (Table 3) associated with a unit change in an independent variable.

**Table 2:** Probit model of the probability of engaging in (direct informal or organization-based volunteer work (marginal effects)

	Males & Females	Females	Males
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	(base)		
Female	0.018		
<b>Age group</b>			
15-24	(base)		
25-34	-0.011	0.005	-0.027
35-44	-0.048 *	-0.039	-0.060 *
45-54	-0.019	0.031	-0.059 *
55 and over	-0.030	-0.008	-0.054 *
<b>Location</b>			
Rural	(base)		
Urban	0.011	0.007	0.013
<b>Education attainment</b>			
Basic or less	(base)		
Intermediate	0.090 *	0.066 *	0.107 *
Advanced	0.089 *	0.054 *	0.116 *
<b>Family income</b>			
Low	(base)		
Medium	0.073 *	0.078 *	0.066 *
High	0.096 *	0.078 *	0.103 *
<b>Countries</b>			
Jordan	(base)		
Bolivia	0.101 *	0.055	0.140 *
China	0.257 *	0.283 *	0.229 *
Ethiopia	0.237 *	0.216 *	0.249 *
India	0.059 *	0.027	0.078 *
Iraq	0.139 *	0.083 *	0.179 *
Nigeria	0.437 *	0.442 *	0.424 *
Uganda	0.405 *	0.396 *	0.406 *
<b>Labour-market status</b>			
Employees	(base)		
Self-employed	0.069 *	0.047 *	0.079 *
In education	-0.017	-0.015	-0.012
NEET (family-related)	-0.046 *	-0.054 *	0.018
NEET (other reasons)	0.025	0.015	0.022
Illness or disability	-0.156 *	-0.203 *	-0.114
<b>Number of observations</b>	<b>8000</b>	<b>3732</b>	<b>4268</b>

**Note:** \* indicates that the estimated marginal effect is statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . The values reported in the table reflect the change in the probability of volunteering associated with each spatial and demographic characteristic compared to the base, evaluated at the mean of the outcome probability. NEET (referring to “Not in Education, Employment or Training”) is subdivided according to whether NEET status is family-related or not. Educational attainment is based on the ILO aggregation of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to produce a simple classification of individual educational attainment which is comparable across countries. Broadly speaking: “**basic or less**” educational attainment corresponds to either no schooling or the completion of early childhood, primary or lower secondary education; “**intermediate**” to the completion of upper secondary education; and “**advanced**” to the completion of tertiary educational studies. Data source: UNV Survey.

### 2.3.4 Determinants of direct informal volunteer work

The determinants of direct informal volunteer work differ from those of organization-based formal volunteer work (see Table 3). As with volunteer work overall (see Table 2), gender differences alone do not significantly affect involvement in either form of volunteer work, however when combined with other characteristics, patterns emerge. Advanced educational attainment is associated with greater participation in organization-based formal volunteer work, especially among men. Furthermore, men who are in education are less likely to engage in direct informal volunteer work, whereas women's involvement remains unchanged regardless of their educational attainment.

At the country level, Asian countries in this survey have a higher prevalence of direct informal volunteer work, while the Latin America and the Caribbean sample leans towards greater involvement in organization-based formal volunteer work. Bolivian volunteers are highly likely to be in more organization-based formal volunteer work than direct informal volunteering and even the gender-disaggregated values show the same results with no gender gap. Meanwhile, volunteers in China, India and Uganda tend to volunteer directly and informally. These results are not observed among Indian men or women, suggesting gender does not play a role in determining the likelihood of Indian men and women in this type of work. In contrast, in China and Uganda men were more likely than women to volunteer in direct and informal contexts. In the other four countries, gender gaps in direct informal volunteer work are less evident when considered in isolation from the influence of other geographic and demographic characteristics.

More nuanced findings also emerge. For example, a marked U-shape age-profile of engagement can be observed in informal volunteering among men. This means that younger and older men are more likely to volunteer informally than those who are middle-aged. This is perhaps due to middle-aged men having less time available for volunteering. In contrast, age was not a contributing factor to the participation of women in direct informal volunteering – women of all ages were equally likely to be engaged in direct informal volunteer work. In the following section, we will look in more detail at the motivations underlying informal volunteering to help explain the patterns observed here.

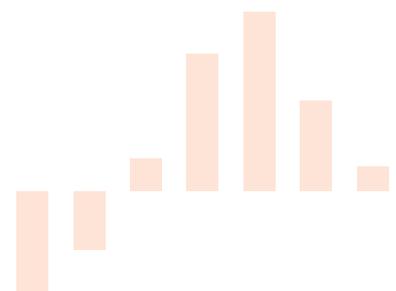
**Table 3:** Probit model of the probability of engaging in direct informal volunteer work as opposed to organization-based formal volunteer work (marginal effects)

	Males and Females	Females	Males
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	(base)		
Female	0.016		
<b>Age group</b>			
15-24	(base)		
25-34	-0.012	0.032	-0.061 *
35-44	-0.029	0.027	-0.088 *
45-54	-0.016	0.012	-0.059
55 and over	0.018	0.041	-0.021
<b>Location</b>			
Rural	(base)		
Urban	0.014	-0.003	0.023
<b>Educational attainment</b>			
Basic or less	(base)		
Intermediate	-0.018	-0.020	-0.017
Advanced	-0.071 *	-0.062 *	-0.077 *
<b>Family income</b>			
Low	(base)		
Medium	-0.012	-0.023	0.006
High	-0.023	-0.026	-0.012
<b>Countries</b>			
Jordan	(base)		
Bolivia	-0.078 *	-0.076 *	-0.077 *
China	0.134 *	0.134 *	0.140 *
Ethiopia	0.025	0.038	0.015
India	0.068 *	0.078	0.071
Iraq	0.045	0.044	0.050
Nigeria	0.038	0.033	0.038
Uganda	0.058 *	0.032	0.100 *
<b>Labour-market status</b>			
Employees	(base)		
Self-employed	0.009	0.001	0.018
In education	-0.035	0.007	-0.086 *
NEET (family-related)	0.066 *	0.059	0.011
NEET (other reasons)	0.012	0.057	-0.025
Illness or disability	0.015	-0.119	
<b>Number of observations</b>	<b>2960</b>	<b>1439</b>	<b>1515</b>

**Note:** \* indicates that the estimated marginal effect is statistically significant at  $p < .05$ . Values reported in the table reflect the change in the probability of volunteering associated with each spatial and demographic characteristic compared to the base, evaluated at the mean of the outcome probability. NEET refers to Not in Education Employment or Training which is subdivided according to whether the reasons for being NEET are family-related or not. Educational attainment is defined here based on the ILO aggregation of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) designed to produce a simple classification of individual educational attainment which is comparable across countries. Broadly speaking: “**basic or less**” educational attainment corresponds to either no schooling or the completion of early childhood, primary or lower secondary education; “**intermediate**” to the completion of upper secondary education; and “**advanced**” to the completion of tertiary educational studies. Data source: UNV Survey.

## Key takeaways on the characteristics of informal volunteering

- Levels of informal and formal volunteering vary considerably between countries. Volunteering rates range from under 30 to nearly 80 per cent among the eight countries in the UNV survey.
- Within countries, the effect of living in a rural or urban environment varies, revealing an almost 20 percentage point difference in China (rural 44.7 per cent and urban 62.3 per cent, respectively), while there was no significant difference in Nigeria (rural 76.8 per cent and urban 75.4 per cent, respectively).
- Volunteering rates dip in midlife, particularly among 35- to 44-year-olds, driven by the fall in direct informal volunteering among men.
- Family income has a much weaker relationship with direct informal volunteering compared to organization-based volunteering. In some countries direct informal volunteering increases with family income while in others it falls and in yet others there is no obvious relationship between income and direct informal volunteering.
- Regarding gender differences alone, being female or male does not make a big difference to engagement in volunteering. However, the intersection of gender with other demographic characteristics is significant for volunteering. Women volunteer less when they are also involved in unpaid care within their homes or are living with illnesses and disabilities. Meanwhile, highly educated or better-off men and women are more likely to volunteer than their less-educated or worse-off counterparts.
- Men in education and training tend to engage in organization-based rather than direct informal, volunteering. Younger and older men engage in more informal direct volunteering, with middle-aged men being less involved. Women of all ages, regardless of educational attendance status, are equally likely to volunteer directly and informally.



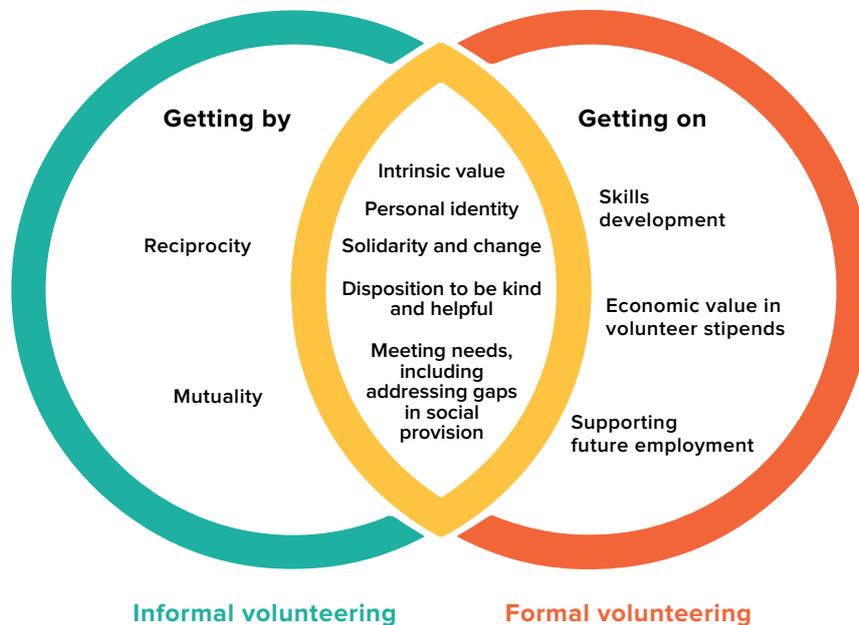
### 3. UNDERSTANDING INFORMAL VOLUNTEERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

#### 3.1 The work of informal volunteers

Volunteering takes place in and is influenced by its social and spatial contexts (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2021). We now turn to the people, places and circumstances of direct informal volunteer work. To better understand this overlooked form of work, this section considers what drives, constrains and enables this work, as well as volunteers' experiences. Given the limited research into informal volunteering to date, the following account builds upon what has been published, while acknowledging its limitations.<sup>5</sup> While striving to share examples and insights from diverse localities, our discussion is disproportionately focused on studies from high-income countries.

Volunteering meets diverse needs for both volunteers and non-volunteers. When considering the value of volunteering as an overall category, we previously identified the following key areas: meeting societal needs, especially when there are gaps in social provision; intrinsic value, which relates to personal identity and skills development; and its economic value, as relates to both income in the form of volunteer stipends and opening opportunities for future employment (Barford, Brockie and O'Higgins 2024).

**Figure 7:** Current understandings of what drives informal and formal volunteer work



**Note:** This figure is based on a review of the existing, but somewhat sparse and Global North-focused literature. It is likely that further qualitative research undertaken in diverse settings and with a gender lens would reveal a much broader set of drivers than those listed here. This is because the context in which volunteer work takes place is likely to alter the balance of drivers for these different categories. Thus, identifying the drivers of different forms of volunteer work – especially informal volunteer work – remains work in progress.

<sup>5</sup> The conceptual and methodological reasons for the dearth of research mentioned above are compounded by the uneven nature of social and economic research whereby much greater research activity and publishing occurs in countries in the Global North (Dorling *et al.*, 2008), also often with a research focus on higher-income countries.

The drivers for direct informal volunteer work are multifaceted and overlap somewhat with the drivers for formal volunteer work (see Figure 7). Many of the motivations and drivers for informal volunteering relate to “getting by” (Kearns and Parkinson 2001, in Dean 2022; Barford and Coombe 2019). The overarching drivers include meeting the needs of volunteers and non-volunteers and reciprocity and solidarity. Absent were the more aspirational drivers associated with “getting on” or “making a life” (Barford and Cieslik 2019), such as income, future job opportunities and skills development. These drivers are an important part of understanding direct informal volunteer work. For a fuller understanding, volunteers’ experiences must also be considered, alongside what constrains and supports volunteering.

### 3.1.1 Meeting needs

Regarding informal volunteering, Dean notes that “for most people, we have perfectly useful synonyms for it: helping, kindness, neighbourliness, and so on” (Dean 2022, 529).

For some, personal identities and interests may direct them towards informal volunteering. Helping and kindness are traits that, when applied appropriately, benefit volunteers and those around them. Finkelstein (2012) identifies how informal volunteering is related to collectivism, intrinsic motivation and agency. Research in Japan has identified how having “empathy and [a] religious mind” increases the likelihood of informal volunteering, even after controlling for variables such as religious attendance for (Mitani 2014, 1035).

The UNV survey shows how for many, direct informal volunteer work is connected to a wider sense of purpose (see Figure 8). Among both direct informal and organization-based volunteers, the primary stated motivation for volunteering was to help others. In almost all the countries surveyed, this is the main motivation for over 90 per cent of respondents.<sup>6</sup> At the aggregate level and in every country – with the notable exception of women in Iraq – the share of direct informal volunteers whose primary motivation is “helping others” is significantly larger than for organization-based volunteers.

It might also be observed that – consistent with the analysis of Barford *et al.* (2024) – female volunteers (both organization-based and direct informal) are more likely to cite the “getting by” motivation than male volunteers. Here, “getting by” refers to systems of reciprocal support. Again, this is true not just in aggregated cross-country averages but also, for the most part, in the individual countries covered by the survey. The exceptions here are female direct informal volunteers in Iraq and Jordan and organization-based volunteers in Bolivia and Jordan.

<sup>6</sup> Respondents may be involved in more than one volunteer work activity and more than one type of volunteering. In this analysis, we are focused on the main motivation for the primary volunteering activity.

**Figure 8:** Share of direct informal and organization-based volunteers citing “helping others” as their main reason for volunteering, 2025



**Note:** Some forms of volunteer work are associated more closely with “getting on” (accessing aspirational opportunities), whereas other forms are primarily related to “getting by” (systems of reciprocal support). Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

The meaningfulness of direct informal volunteer work was emphasized in a study of older women in Queensland, Australia (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006). In contrast to their male counterparts whose social worlds tended to contract post-retirement, female research participants associated informal volunteer work with pride, enjoyment, meaning and “a great deal of satisfaction”. One respondent commented that “it was something I was put on this Earth to do and I don’t care whoever asks me, I say it is what I love doing – to help other people in need.” This contrasts with a wider literature which positions informal volunteering as devalued and exploitative work (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006, 64). Direct informal volunteer work can help volunteers to stay engaged with wider society, benefiting them as individuals and fostering intergenerational connections (Egerton and Mullan 2008).

Where state services and social protection are minimal, informal and formal volunteer work become more necessary to meet people’s needs. Informal volunteers might offer an alternative form of provision and formal volunteers may prop up state services in the face of austerity and a diminishing paid workforce. Volunteering from within a community or network can be more responsive and flexible than organization-based volunteering. For instance, during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Nepal, some young people helped and supported neighbours who were struggling (Barford *et al.* 2025). Meanwhile, in the face of climate shocks, informal volunteering might involve checking in on others and caring for others’ children, activities which are built upon existing trust and social cohesion (Ranganathan and Bratman 2019).

In reality, informal and spontaneous volunteers are often acknowledged to be the first responders to disasters and emergencies (Baillie Smith, Jenkins *et al.* 2022). Some of the value of informal volunteering lies precisely in this capacity to respond to a “directly experienced community need” (Lewis 2015). In this vein, Egerton and Mullan (2008) characterize informal volunteering as a basic welfare activity, which could also be provided by the state or a charity. Certainly, strong state services and social protection could lessen the demand and sense of responsibility that is sometimes placed on volunteers.

It is important to remember that informal volunteers are often from the community where their volunteer work takes place, giving them a particular lens and positionality on the challenges faced. Fadel’s work in Burundi (2022) highlights how volunteers are subjected to similar vulnerabilities as others in their community. Seeing volunteering as stemming from where challenges lie, rather than being external to these, disrupts the “traditional “giver” and “receiver” dichotomies” (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022, 38) and emphasizes the mutuality and solidarity of direct informal volunteer work.

### 3.1.2 Reciprocity and solidarity

Mutual aid is a relationship practice by which we grow in our understanding that sharing ourselves, our talents, our listening ears, and witnessing eyes is not an elective process, but one that is necessary for collective survival and is a part of our responsibility to each other as interdependent selves. (Reese and Johnson 2022, 36)

Some forms of informal volunteering are associated with reciprocity, solidarity and mutuality. This social connectivity, at times with a critical or political dimension seeking change, takes a distinctive form in informal volunteering. Unlike participation in charity, mutuality seeks the transformation of interpersonal relationships for the good of communities (Reese and Johnson 2022). Mutuality involves the practice of giving and receiving the precious gifts of time, attention, love and skills,; leading to the knowledge that “we always belong” (hooks 2001, 164; Reese and Johnson 2022). This explains the close interpersonal, and sometimes political, nature of some informal volunteering.

Much informal volunteering is characterized by reciprocity, in other words people taking turns to help one another over time. Social norms of reciprocity and mutual assistance disrupt more traditional understandings of volunteering, namely that volunteering is the provision of unidirectional assistance by “carers” to “the cared for” (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2021, 1355). Nevertheless, swapping favours and goods to “get by” was a key survival strategy identified among Black families living in poverty in the United States during the 1970s (Stack 1974, in Dean 2022). This illustrates “volunteering as livelihood”, rather than the more common conception of “volunteering to improve livelihoods” (Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022, 36).

The ways in which informal volunteering shapes and is shaped by local and individual level social issues (UNW 2020) is observed in the direct informal volunteer work of older people in Australia. Their volunteer work builds strong intergenerational relations and creates positive roles for older people, while also providing essential mutual support which means older people can live in their communities for longer (Warburton and Mclaughlin 2005). Thus, informal volunteering not only forges relationships within a community, it also enables older people to continue to participate for longer and so influences the composition and demographic structure of communities.

Perceptions of such reciprocal, mutually supporting informal volunteer relationships vary. One study of the low-income St. Anns council estate in Nottingham in the United Kingdom identified how residents collectively adapt and cooperate to “get by”. Activities include the informal provision of childcare and “looking out” for one another. Although these informal volunteer activities are not legitimized by wider society, within the local system there is mutual value and shared reliance (McKenzie 2015; Dean 2022). In St. Anns, informal volunteering to get by is, to some extent, performed in spite of the wider society.

While community matters, national policies also influence people’s engagement in informal volunteering. Two contrasting examples of divergent policy contexts are Singapore and the United States of America. Singapore reports comparatively low levels of any type of volunteering among older adults. This is explained in terms of social policies which emphasize the need to support one’s family, rather than focusing on meeting community or societal needs (Ang and Malhotra 2024). Meanwhile, urban communities experiencing “state abandonment” in Chicago and Austin in the United States of America are responding with mutual aid to meet care needs. These efforts were catalysed by varied experiences of police violence, food insecurity, winter storms and multi-day power cuts (Reese and Johnson 2022).

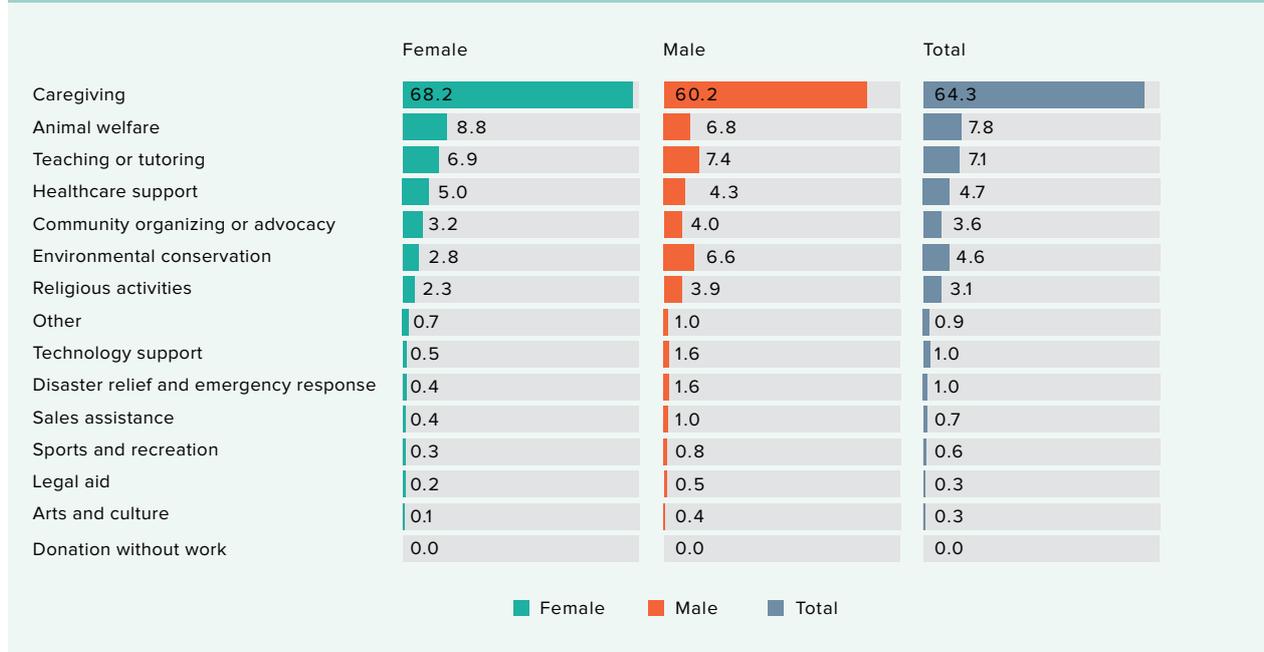
One interesting reflection is how much reciprocal direct informal volunteer work is truly a free choice. This work does fall under the strict definitions of not being forced and being without civil, legal or administrative requirement (see Box 1). Nevertheless, refusal to help could result in consequences such as lost status, lost friendships or even ostracization from the group (Einolf *et al.* 2016, 224).<sup>7</sup> Conversely, engaging in direct informal volunteer work in reciprocal ways could offer community-based benefits such as status, friendship, group membership and support.

<sup>7</sup> Note that the 19th ICLS resolution clarifies that work is not considered to be volunteer work if people do it because of legal/administrative obligations or because are coerced into it. Fulfilment of social responsibilities of a communal, cultural or religious nature, on the other hand, are considered voluntary. Examples of volunteering groups provided in the resolution include: “self-help, mutual aid or community-based groups of which the volunteer is a member”.

### 3.1.3 Volunteer experiences

Direct informal volunteer work predominantly involves care work. This form of work is associated with (and builds upon) strong interpersonal relationships, bringing a sense of personal identity and agency and, depending on the context, direct informal volunteering can be associated with worsened or improved physical health. The UNV survey shows that two out of three informal volunteers are involved in care work. Care work is the major form of direct informal volunteer work among both women and men (see Figure 9). Care includes care for people, animals, teaching and health care. Slight gender differences emerge. Women's direct informal volunteer work is more heavily focused on care than men's. Men's informal volunteering has slightly more of a wider societal focus compared to women's, for example with more focus on activities such as environmental conservation, religious activities, technology support, disaster relief and sports.

**Figure 9:** Distribution of type of direct informal volunteer work activity, 2025 (% of direct informal volunteers)

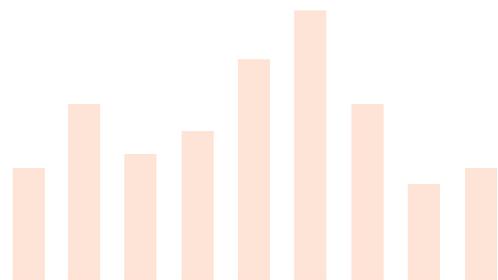


**Note:** Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

In contrast to formal volunteering, informal volunteering is characterized by a shorter “psychological distance” between the volunteer and the so-called beneficiaries. Analysis of the Community Life Survey in England found that informal volunteering has a stronger association with well-being than formal volunteering. This is in part because formal volunteering is more structured and regulated, while informal volunteering is more interpersonal and community-based. As such, informal volunteers are likely to see the benefits of their contribution being experienced by people whom they care about. Seeing the tangible benefits of one’s work can be particularly rewarding (Appau and Awaworyi Churchill 2019, 1120).

Furthermore, because direct informal volunteer work is unmediated by any structures and is usually interpersonal, volunteers typically retain a strong sense of personal agency. This sentiment is captured in one volunteer’s comment that “you are doing it from your heart” (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006, 65). In the previously cited study of older Australian informal volunteers, respondents highlighted their free choice to participate. The flexibility and informality mean that volunteering can be adapted to volunteers’ changeable life circumstances. When agency was reduced and volunteering was done out of a sense of obligation, volunteers’ experiences deteriorated (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006). The strong sense of role identity associated with helping their community gives volunteers meaning while reinforcing the cohesiveness of social units (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006).

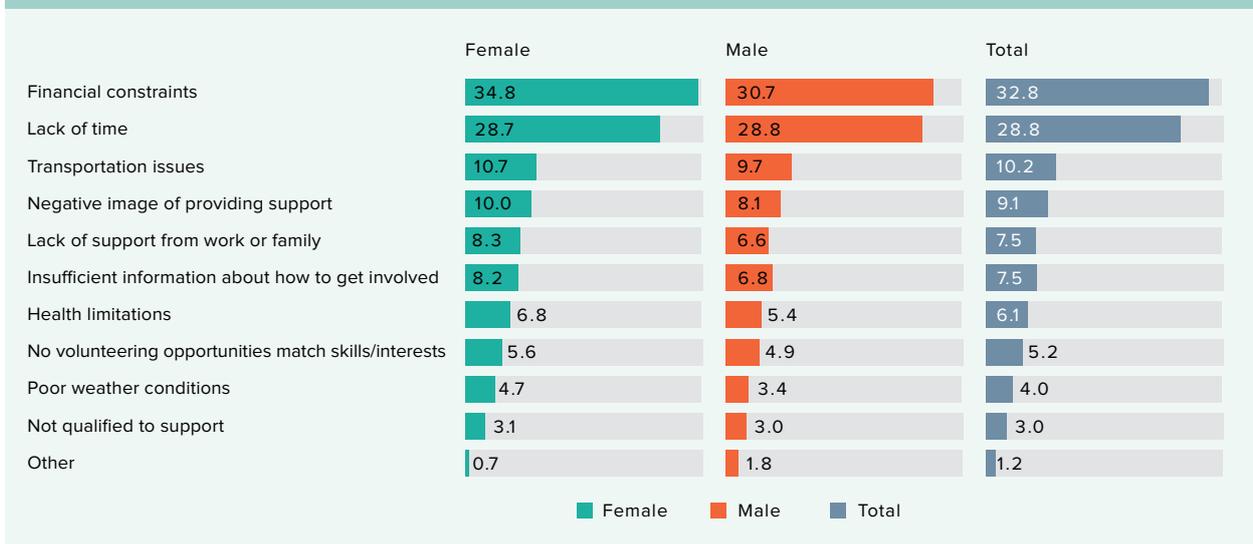
Informal volunteering also has noteworthy impacts on physical health. One longitudinal study in the United States of America found divergent health outcomes related to cognitive function by racial group. Cognitive impairment was associated with informal volunteering among non-Hispanic Black older adults, whereas informal volunteering among White older adults was linked better cognitive function (Wang *et al.* 2022). These divergent impacts perhaps point to differences in what informal volunteering means in practice for various groups. Overall, there is very little research into the health impacts of informal volunteering (Wang *et al.* 2022), and future work could usefully investigate this association in other contexts and for other health indicators.



### 3.2 Constraints on volunteering

Time and personal finances are key constraints to informal volunteering, likely due to direct informal volunteer work being without stipends or reimbursement for time or travel. In contrast, some formal volunteer work comes with a stipend to facilitate engagement. In some settings, particularly where paid work is scarce, these volunteer stipends become an important source of money for volunteers. The UNV survey confirms that financial constraints and lack of time are the primary obstacles to direct informal volunteer work reported by survey respondents (see Figure 10). Among organization-based volunteers the primary challenges were not too different: a lack of time was reported to be a major obstacle, followed by financial constraints.

**Figure 10:** Primary problems faced by direct informal volunteers by gender, 2025 (% of direct informal volunteers)



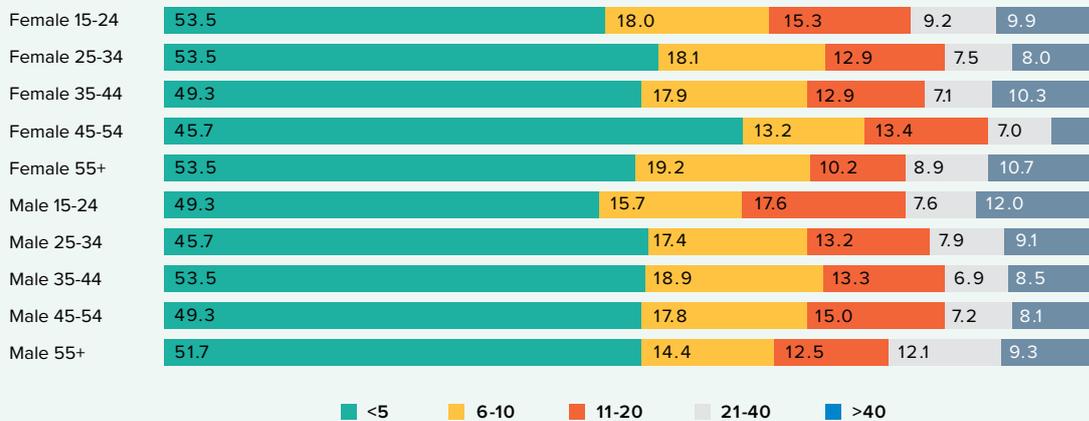
**Note:** Respondent may have reported one or more problems. Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

The issues of time and money also took centre stage in the recent ILO/UNV publication on volunteer work among older people (Morgan and Elder 2025). Though not specifically focused on informal volunteering, this earlier report found that minimal free time, due to domestic work in their own homes or ongoing agricultural labour, can deter some older people from volunteering (Morgan and Elder 2025). Further, older people may not necessarily have adequate financial resources to free themselves up for voluntary activities. This seems to be important in determining whether older people volunteer (Morgan and Elder 2025). Specific policy contexts and, above all, systems of social protection, alongside norms of familial support, also influence people's capacity to volunteer.

Factors other than time also constrain or enable volunteering. Qualitative research in Australia has shed some light on this (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006). As women enter older age, key roles shift, including leaving paid work and shifting family roles and the time they have available to volunteer may increase. A cohort effect also emerges as older women in Australia today are of a generation whereby social norms were to leave the workforce upon marriage and engage in informal volunteering throughout their adulthood (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006). Thus, women’s informal volunteer work as younger adults also paved the way for their continued volunteering as they age. This was distinct from their male counterparts who experienced a different set of social expectations in the form of bread-winner roles, meaning that even when their time availability increases their inclination to do direct informal volunteer work may not.

In the UNV survey of eight low- and middle-income countries, older people were no more likely than others to engage in any form of volunteer work (see Section 2.3.3). However, when analysing age and time spent doing direct informal volunteer work, a slightly different picture emerges (see Figure 11). There is a clearly discernible U-shaped pattern in the age-profile for time spent doing direct informal volunteer work among women and men. Younger and older direct informal volunteers – both female and male – spend more time on this activity than prime age adults (who may be busy in paid employment and unpaid work within their own homes, supporting the time-availability hypothesis). This trend is a little more pronounced among women.

**Figure 11:** Distribution of time spent per month on direct informal volunteer work by gender and age, 2025

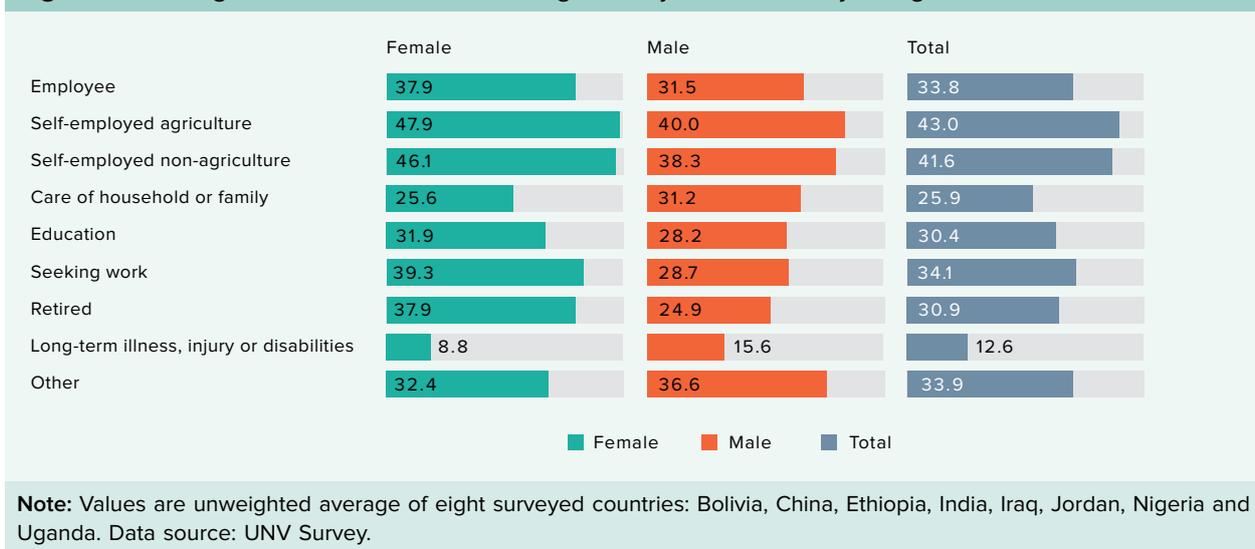


**Note:** Values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

There is also some support, albeit partial, for the time-availability thesis in our sample (see Figure 12). The “unemployed”<sup>8</sup> – in this case recorded as those seeking work as their primary activity – and retired women rank among those most likely to be engaged in direct informal volunteer work. However, this is not true of men and, for both women and men, the largest share of direct informal volunteers is found among the self-employed, as already observed. It is possible that in this case, reciprocal – and presumably reciprocated – mutual aid trumps other considerations such as the time constraints that self-employment may impose.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, an analysis of informal and formal volunteering in the United Kingdom also found that retired women spent more time engaged in informal volunteer work than men. However, the highest level of informal volunteering, according to employment status and gender, was among unemployed men (Table III; Egerton and Mullan 2008). Here, too, volunteering depends, at least in part, on having the time available to volunteer and the relative luxury of being able to not spend time on other activities involving household or market-related production (Egerton and Mullan 2008).

**Figure 12: Average direct informal volunteering rates by current activity and gender, 2025**



<sup>8</sup> This refers to the two-fold criteria (seeking employment and not employed) definition of unemployment as opposed to the three-fold criteria (seeking, available and not employed).

<sup>9</sup> The survey questions used may shape this finding. The question used to establish labour status is a general one concerning self-reported main activity. Men tend to not self-report as being unemployed even when they know they are, which also influences the analysis of their responses.

In terms of disability and poor health, an analysis of the 2018 Community Life Survey in England shows that people with life-limiting illnesses or disabilities are more inclined to volunteer informally than those who do not have a life-limiting illness or disability (34 per cent compared to 26 per cent), although both groups participate in formal volunteering at the same rate of 24 per cent (Dean 2022, 530-53; Campbell-Stephens 2021). Conversely, the UNV survey found that people with disabilities or long-term illnesses have the lowest rates of engagement in direct informal volunteer work. This association may be heavily influenced by context.<sup>10</sup>

The 2018 research in England also showed slightly higher rates of informal volunteering among unemployed people than employed people (Dean 2022). Rather than drawing on the time-availability argument, the researchers suggest that the constraints of informal volunteering are low for marginalized groups:

Informal volunteering plays a larger role in the lives of those traditionally excluded or socially discriminated against groups [...] than those in hegemonic social groups. [...] Partly this is because informal volunteering may be an activity that is easier to access than formal volunteering, lacking the bureaucracy associated with assisting an organization. (Dean 2022, 531).

Again, context is key. Context influences both who does what type of volunteer work and also influences how much research has been done into the volunteers and their work. On the global scale in particular, there is minimal understanding of the constraints on direct informal volunteer work in the diverse contexts of middle- and lower-income countries.

<sup>10</sup> The sample size of people with illnesses and disabilities is rather small in the UNV survey, similar to household surveys, and even smaller when investigating further breakdowns. Thus, this paper does not delve deeper into studying this group, as the small sample size limits the reliability of estimates concerning the volunteering behaviour of respondents with illnesses and disabilities.

### 3.3 Supporting informal volunteers

While research gaps persist around direct informal volunteer work, it is nevertheless valuable to consider what good practice looks like when it comes to supporting volunteers. Recognizing that enough support may not exist begs the question of what support might be useful. To answer this, direct informal volunteer work needs to be understood on its own terms, rather than being treated in the same way as formal volunteer work, so that its distinctive nature is not subsumed by wider structures.

Activities that are grounded in grass-roots movements and local needs may not respond well to top-down programming. The self-help group model in India is an example of this. While not an example of direct volunteering, due to being organized into a group of around 10-20 people, women's self-help groups typically convened around savings and credit activities in India. Self-help groups have become a "blueprint" promoted by the government and NGOs to promote women's empowerment. Along the way, however, the model has lost the elements of flexibility and innovation. In fact, imposing an external value system of self-help groups can ultimately further disempower those who are already marginalized (Jakimow and Kilby 2006).

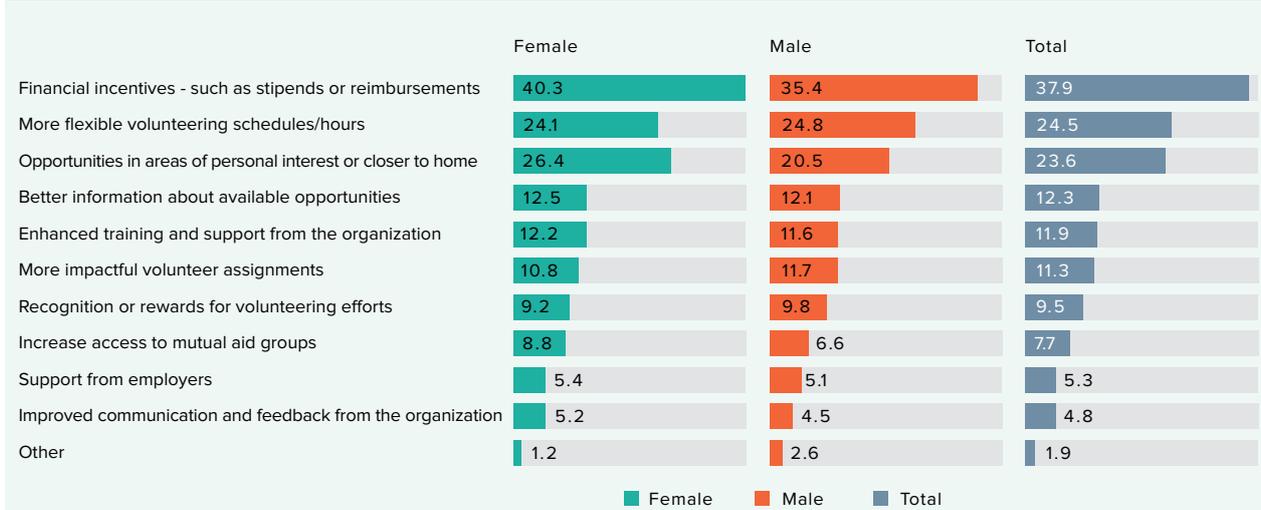
Fears of mutual aid being co-opted also exist. This might involve displacing community leaders with university-educated leaders, the non-profitization of mutual aid and receiving funding from non-radical sources (Reese and Johnson 2022). Thus, what might feel like support in terms of personnel, formal structures and funding could undermine the distinctive core of mutual aid. While formal volunteering might well benefit from such interventions, the characteristics of informal volunteering may require other forms of support.<sup>11</sup>

The UNV survey findings indicate key areas for improvement identified by direct informal volunteers across the eight countries (see Figure 13). Specifically, money and time reappear as the most prominent concerns. A substantial proportion of survey respondents (37.9 per cent) suggested that they would appreciate financial support, such as a stipend or reimbursement. Technically speaking, introducing stipends may shift direct informal volunteer work towards become formal and organization-based.

In terms of time, roughly a quarter of respondents to the UNV survey said that more flexible scheduling of volunteering would be an improvement. Another sizeable concern, held by 23.6 per cent of respondents, was that volunteering should align more closely with their personal interests or be located closer to their home. On average, women were more interested than men in the possibility of financial support, as well as in opportunities being in their area of interest or closer to home.

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<sup>11</sup> Mutual aid and self-help groups often involve some form of informal organization, so are not examples of direct informal volunteer work. These examples are shared here to offer some insight into ways to support informal volunteer work in general, especially given that there the literature review found little information on ways to support direct informal volunteer work.

**Figure 13:** Areas suggested for improvement by direct informal volunteers by gender, 2025

**Note:** Respondents may have reported one or more problems and areas of improvement. Cross-country values are unweighted average of eight surveyed countries: Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Data source: UNV Survey.

The literature on informal volunteering points to several ways to support informal volunteer work, ranging from improving infrastructure, cultivating attitudes and awareness and approaching volunteering as a blended activity. Infrastructural improvements – including good roads, good public transport, quality food shops and strong schools – can enable the continued provision of mutual aid (Reese and Johnson 2022). For example, good infrastructure enables safe, efficient and affordable travel for volunteers, provides venues for community members to gather and makes healthy and affordable food accessible for food banks. In this way, a decent, reliable urban infrastructure facilitates mutual aid and does so without co-opting its internal mechanisms and processes.

Various authors suggest engaging with attitudes towards volunteering. Writing about informal volunteering in Japan, Mitani (2014) proposes working in schools, homes and at a societal level to develop broad-minded attitudes towards informal and formal volunteering. In Singapore, where informal volunteering is fairly unusual, such interventions could normalize the receipt of unpaid help from non-family members (Ang and Malhotra 2024). Regarding the work of older informal volunteers in Australia, a useful change in attitude would be to shift the discourse around ageing from its focus on spiralling costs for social and health care, to properly recognize the integral role of older people in their communities, including as direct informal volunteers (Warburton and McLaughlin 2006).

Another useful approach here is that of “blended volunteering”. This concept considers how planned and unplanned aspects of volunteering, along with its different forms and modalities, might combine to ultimately offer something that is “bigger than the sum of its parts” (Baillie Smith, Jenkins *et al.* 2022, 23). In this sense, it is worth considering how informal and formal volunteering intersect and complement one another, while also creating space to preserve the distinctive character and particular benefits offered by informal volunteering.

## Key takeaways on the contributions of informal volunteers

- While informal volunteering is primarily about reciprocal support provided by members of a community however defined (“getting by”), formal volunteering is more likely to also involve some element of personal advancement, such as through building competencies and connections (“getting on”)
- The available literature review did not identify skills development or improved employment prospects as a motivation for informal volunteering
- Meeting needs is an important driver of informal and formal volunteering alike. Informal volunteering, typically from within a community or network, allows a responsiveness and availability which may be harder to achieve with some forms of organization-based volunteering
- Some forms of informal volunteering are associated with reciprocity, solidarity and mutuality. This volunteering is rooted in social connectivity and social cohesion and may be associated with an agenda for change
- Informal volunteering is characterized by a short “psychological distance” between the volunteer and the so-called beneficiaries. As such, informal volunteers often see the impact of their work first-hand
- As informal volunteering is often interpersonal and unmediated by any structures, volunteering may come with a strong sense of personal agency
- Financial constraints and lack of time are the major obstacles to informal volunteering. Financial constraints appear to be more limiting for women than men
- Looking at time spent on informal volunteering, there is a U-shaped age-profile for both women and men. Younger and older informal volunteers spend more time volunteering informally than prime age adults, especially among men
- People living with disabilities or long-term illnesses have the lowest rates of engagement in informal volunteering
- The “unemployed” - in this case recorded as those seeking work as their primary activity – and retired women rank among those most likely to be engaged in informal volunteering.
- Informal volunteering must be understood on its own terms, rather than being treated in the same way as formal volunteering. Interventions should be undertaken cautiously, because the autonomy and agency which are often so central to informal volunteering could be compromised if external agencies engage in a heavy-handed way
- The UNV survey analysis points to money and time as key areas for enabling informal volunteering. This might involve providing financial support such as a stipend or reimbursement and more flexibility in scheduling informal volunteering

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has collated and contributed to the small body of literature on direct informal volunteer work, which to date has disproportionately focused on higher-income countries. We contribute an analysis of an eight-country UNV survey of volunteering across middle- and lower-income countries, namely Bolivia, China, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria and Uganda. Our analysis builds upon and extends existing work on the nature of direct informal volunteer work across countries.

Direct informal volunteer work is generally poorly understood as a concept, in part due to the mismatch between dominant ideas of volunteering with its characteristics of everyday community and neighbourhood-based activities. Direct informal volunteer work and organization-based formal volunteer work are somewhat different from one another (in terms of activities, outcomes and who gets involved), albeit that informal and formal volunteers may share similar motivations.

This report is aligned with the recommendation of other scholars in the field, concluding that informal volunteering should be understood on its own terms. This should involve using terminology that is relevant and meaningful to volunteers themselves, rather than reusing the framings applied to the more extensively researched activity of formal volunteering (after Dean 2022 and Baillie Smith, Mills *et al.* 2022). We have approached direct informal volunteer work as distinctive, at times using formal volunteering as a reference point to tease out differences between these forms of volunteering.

Consistent with earlier reports (UNV 2018), our analysis finds that informal volunteering remains the dominant form of volunteering type in all countries and when disaggregated by gender (the single exception is that more men in Bolivia volunteer formally than informally). Levels of informal volunteering vary across the eight countries studied in this report. The African countries reported higher levels of volunteering, while the Arab States and South American countries and India had lower levels. Given the predominance and (largely undocumented) social contributions made by direct informal volunteer work, it is useful to embrace this concept as a basis for extending and intensifying related research.

The notion of direct informal volunteer work as a means to “get by” or as a form of livelihood (Dean 2022; Baillie Smith, Jenkins *et al.* 2022) helps to explain volunteering patterns. Direct informal volunteering is often characterized by reciprocity, solidarity and mutual support. Women, and particularly less-educated women, are significantly more likely than men to engage in this activity. In contrast, formal volunteer work is sometimes seen as a way to “get on” in life and is particularly popular with men who are still in education. In terms of time availability, younger and older men spend more time on direct informal volunteer work, with middle-aged men doing less, likely due to other time commitments and social norms.

Guided by the literature and our analyses in this report, we now turn to what various agencies and actors might do to redress the gaps in evidence, understanding and policy around direct informal volunteer work. Given the socially embedded and unorganized nature of direct informal volunteer work, the question about the way in which wider agencies might engage is rather delicate. While informal volunteering may be beyond the remit of many actors, it would be a disservice to overlook it. Deepening understanding must form a key pillar of the next phases of this work, such that future policies and support are tailored to recognize, enable and support those engaged in this form of volunteer work.

Based on the results of our analysis, we put forward the following recommendations to stakeholders:

#### **National statistical offices:**

- ▶▶ **Apply nationally appropriate questions to measure informal volunteer work.** As informal volunteering is not an intuitive concept, even for volunteers themselves, it may be useful to develop context-specific questions to be able to identify this form of work. This can be reinforced by sensitizing national statistical offices to what informal volunteering is by sharing examples and qualitative research findings (see recommendations below). The survey methodology developed by the ILO and UNV to improve the measurement of direct, traditional forms of volunteer work can serve as the basis for this.
- ▶▶ **Increase the measurement of informal volunteering within labour-force and time use surveys.** Measurement should enable gender, age and income disaggregated analyses. It would also be useful to identify the type of activities people engage in, e.g. care or environmental work. Time use survey data collection could helpfully be used to analyse informal volunteering and how it fits into people's daily lives (e.g. Barford, Brockie and O'Higgins 2024).

#### **Policymakers at all levels of government (national, regional and local):**

- ▶▶ **Progress towards appropriate forms of recognition of informal volunteering.** This can include moving towards recognition of volunteering as a legitimate form of civic engagement which is distinct from formal labour. The groundwork for this includes ensuring that informal volunteering features in wider national discussions about volunteering, as well as agreeing strong legal definitions of informal volunteering. This can provide the foundations for the subsequent legal recognition of informal volunteering and its inclusion within national volunteer strategies, as well as in work policies and other relevant policies. Key considerations include protecting community ownership of informal volunteer work and avoiding using volunteers to substitute for public services.
- ▶▶ **Create enabling environments for informal volunteering,** which entails governments and relevant stakeholders caring for “the conditions in which local volunteers act” (Fadel 2020, 9). For instance, this could include creating micro-stipends for informal volunteers. Focusing policy, organizational and donor attention on local volunteerism, in line with the recommendations of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) Global Review on Volunteering (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015), could establish a multi-agency approach to nurture and protect informal volunteering.
- ▶▶ **Adopt a supportive approach rather than an extractive one.** Listen to and understand existing community-based models. Provide support that strengthens these initiatives without taking them over. Focus on volunteer well-being, safety and security.
- ▶▶ **Ensure that local initiatives are not appropriated by others and do not substitute the roles and responsibilities of other actors.** Avoid the appropriation or instrumentalization of informal volunteering by government or donors, especially as this can add substantial burdens to communities who are already stretched (Fadel and Chadwick 2020; Jenkins 2008; Perold and Graham 2017; all in Baillie Smith, Jenkins *et al.* 2022, p.19).

### Ministries of education, training and work:

- ▶▶ Consider whether informal volunteering might be usefully treated as work experience. To date, formal volunteering has been valued as an exchangeable form of cultural capital, for instance being listed on CVs to “get on” in life. Meanwhile, informal volunteering is usually not treated in this way. Leaders include Ireland and Germany, where informal volunteering is recognized as a form of experiential learning. Bahrain, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon and Türkiye also recognize informal volunteer work in disaster situations. Lessons learned from these experiences could be used to train statisticians and policymakers, to improve understandings and awareness of informal volunteering.

### Researchers, including academics:

- ▶▶ Enable and support researchers to undertake research into informal volunteers’ experiences in middle- and lower-income countries. To date, these experiences have been largely absent from the literature (with a few notable exceptions). Research from middle- and lower- income countries can provide valuable national perspectives on informal volunteer work. An enabling research environment in middle- and lower-income countries would make it easier for researchers from these countries to initiate and lead this research. UNV, the ILO and governments can help to re-balance research into informal volunteering based on what they fund. The UNV Knowledge Portal on Volunteerism and the ILO Research Repository could collect and curate research on informal volunteering.
- ▶▶ Develop methodologies that integrate quantitative (scale) and qualitative (impact) measures, such as by integrating modules into existing labour-force surveys while also using participatory and ethnographic methods to capture the informal practices often missed by surveys. Qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined to consider demographic differences in volunteering (e.g. gender, age, race and income), experiences and causality.
- ▶▶ Remain open to diverse views on informal volunteer work in order to understand it in volunteers’ own terms and in context. Youth advisory boards and co-research approaches can be used to ground research in locally relevant concepts and to prioritize the perspectives and experiences of those engaged in informal volunteer work (Proefke and Barford 2023; Mills *et al.* 2025).
- ▶▶ Non-profit researchers can pay equal attention to informal and formal volunteering. This research can also be used to encourage policy practitioners pay more attention to informal volunteering. The goal is that informal and formal volunteering are treated more equally across contexts (Dean 2022).

### UN entities:

- ▶▶ Build a network to create an enabling environment for research on informal volunteering. Such a network might consist of a diverse set of institutions including universities, NGOs and other organizations. Such a network could create the conditions to redress the global imbalance in research activities. UN entities are well-positioned to coordinate and nurture this network, creating potential for increased research in middle- and lower-income countries to improve the understanding of informal volunteering in diverse settings, drawing upon locally meaningful terms and concepts. The UNV Knowledge Portal on Volunteerism and the ILO Research Repository could curate research on informal volunteering.

- ▶▶ Support national statistical offices with resources and technical assistance to increase the measurement of informal volunteering. While international standards, measurement guidance and tools exist, few countries implement them. This is due to a lack of resources and capacity, paired with the measurement of volunteer work not being a national priority. Measurement approaches could be tailored to local cultural and social contexts, while still aligning with global standards. In this way, policies can better recognize informal contributions and strengthen community resilience, especially in fragile and disaster contexts.

### Volunteer organizations:

- ▶▶ Learn from informal volunteering to improve formal volunteering. The feelings of closeness and belonging often associated with informal volunteering can lead to stronger engagement, while minimizing psychological distance. Formal volunteering programmes might benefit from such closeness, which could be facilitated by allowing greater volunteer autonomy, flatter organizational structures and smaller teams, with minimized bureaucratic processes (Appau and Awaworyi Churchill 2019). Adapting civil society organizations' volunteer programmes to incorporate relational and flexible elements from informal models, using technology and online platforms, has already been helpful in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Ukraine.
- ▶▶ Acknowledge that informal volunteering often emerges in response to gaps in formal support systems, so may not inherently reflect stronger engagement or satisfaction. As shown in this report, in practice volunteering often fills these gaps to meet people's basic needs.
- ▶▶ Empower local groups to strengthen community engagement and responsiveness. Municipalities may also play a key role in this effort, given their proximity to and reach within local communities.

### Informal volunteers:

- ▶▶ Advise on and engage with the above efforts. It is important to involve informal volunteers, while fairly compensating them for their time and effort. This is especially necessary given the tendency for direct informal volunteers to come from more marginalized communities. Helpful lessons in connecting and co-ordinating disparate people could come from work with other geographically disparate and often-marginalized groups, such as domestic and informal workers.
- ▶▶ Document and narrate their experiences of volunteering. This documentation can be used to improve and nuance understandings of informal volunteering, centring the knowledge and experience of volunteers themselves. Furthermore, a wider project of documentation creates opportunities for informal volunteers to learn from one another and their collective experiences. Such a project could be co-ordinated and supported by members of a UN-initiated network on informal volunteering.



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