

Overview

VOLUNTEERISM IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

When crises strike, volunteers mobilize immediately because they are present, trusted and accountable to their communities. Their action is not contingent on the presence of formal humanitarian systems. Across emergency contexts, volunteers operate throughout the humanitarian programme cycle, from preparedness and immediate response to recovery and transition. As access constraints, insecurity and funding shortfalls intensify, volunteers increasingly remain the final delivery presence. Despite this operational reliance on volunteers, the research finds that their contributions remain weakly articulated within humanitarian planning instruments and insufficiently supported through resourcing, safeguarding and duty-of-care frameworks.

Against a backdrop of rising needs, constrained access and a hyper prioritized humanitarian response under the “Humanitarian Reset,” the current period has been described by humanitarian leadership as a turning point. Applied to localization, the findings indicate that continued reliance on volunteers without explicit recognition, resourcing or safeguarding reflects not an implementation gap, but a sign the system is misaligned. The result is a system that depends on volunteer-based delivery, while planning, financing and safeguarding in a way as if it does not exist.

What the research has revealed:

- ▶ Volunteers perform core and life-saving response functions across all phases of the humanitarian programme cycle, often outside formal system logic. In Sudan, volunteer-led Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and in Ukraine, civic, medical and municipal volunteer networks increasingly substitute for formal actors and where access is constrained.
- ▶ Volunteerism is weakly reflected in humanitarian planning instruments. A review of Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans (HNRP’s), flash appeals and pooled fund frameworks, across varied emergency typologies shows only 50 per cent explicitly name volunteers as actors; most rely on proxy language, and an average of 35 per cent omit volunteers entirely, despite clear operational reliance.
- ▶ Sectors including child protection, health and the Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Area of Responsibility demonstrate clearer visibility of volunteer engagement in planning instruments, reflecting the influence of sector guidance and minimum standards that define expectations

around community-based and volunteer roles, functions and accountability.

- ▶▶ Early response effectiveness depends heavily on volunteer capacity yet remains poorly reflected in formal systems. In the Türkiye-Syria earthquake response, inter-agency evaluations document extensive reliance on volunteers during the initial phase, despite their near absence from flash appeals and early planning frameworks.
- ▶▶ Humanitarian Response Plans (HNRPs) and related planning instruments for 2025-2026 show increased attention to localization; however, volunteer roles central to last-mile delivery remain largely implied within broader local partner categories rather than explicitly identified, planned or costed.
- ▶▶ Duty of care and safeguarding for volunteers decline as institutional affiliation weakens. Case studies from Haiti, Sudan and the State of Palestine show that volunteers affiliated with United Nations agencies or international Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are more likely to be covered by Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Duty of Care systems, while non-affiliated volunteers perform comparable high-risk functions with limited or no protection.
- ▶▶ Trust and local legitimacy increasingly shape response effectiveness yet remain weakly recognized. In contexts such as Sudan and Haiti, collective community practices sustain responses through reciprocity and community accountability where institutional presence is limited or distrusted, although these locally legitimate volunteer models remain largely invisible to formal planning, coordination and financing frameworks.

Investing in preparedness improves readiness and responsiveness

Evidence from contexts where stakeholders have invested in preparedness actions such as across West and East Africa to support the recurrence of Ebola, as well as in Bangladesh, demonstrates that this outcome can be improved.

Where Member States and partners have invested in volunteer frameworks in advance of crises and integrated volunteer needs within national disaster management and public health preparedness systems, their roles are clearer, risks are reduced and response effectiveness improves.

Overall, the findings show that the key challenge is not whether to engage volunteers, but whether the humanitarian system will take responsibility for how volunteer efforts are supported, managed and protected.

Without this shift, localization risks functioning as a transfer of responsibility without the necessary transfer of power, protection or resources, once again placing the greatest burden on those already closest to the crisis.

Scan the QR code to read the full report.

<https://knowledge.unv.org/evidence-library/volunteerism-in-humanitarian-action-supporting-united-nations-entities-and-national-governments-towards-realizing-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development>

