



CHALLENGE PAPER

A Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering

**Framing a Global Dialogue for the
International Year of Volunteers for
Sustainable Development (IVY 2026)**

by Jacob Mwathi Mati,
Helene Perold, and Cliff Allum

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Preface

This Challenge paper was commissioned by four global organizations active in the volunteering space: the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum), the International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and UNICEF Generation Unlimited, all of whom are committed to hosting a series of meaningful conversations about a future global agenda for volunteering in advance of the United Nations 2026 International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026). The purpose of the global dialogue is to encourage and enable a wider set of conversations about volunteering that will inform and inspire what happens with IVY 2026 and beyond, thereby contributing to an ambitious and effective ‘Call to Action’ to deliver greater recognition for and investment in volunteering.¹

As a starting point for these conversations, this paper provides a basis for strategic consideration of what a shared vision for the future of volunteering could be. It comprises three sections, each of which includes questions for discussion. Following an introduction, it first outlines recent trends that have shaped the global volunteer sector. The second section examines the roles of key actors in creating an enabling and supportive environment for volunteering. The concluding third section asks what is required to create an enabling environment for volunteering in 2026 and beyond, and for whom.

Acronyms

CBO	Community based organization
CSO	Civil society organization
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
IVCO	International volunteer cooperation organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SWVR	State of the World’s Volunteerism Report
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
VIO	Volunteer involving organization
VSO	Volunteer Service Overseas

¹ Forum, IAVE, IFRC, UNICEF. *Terms of Reference*, June 2024

Introduction

Volunteers have played an important yet often unrecognized role in ‘sustainable development’.² This was given fresh impetus especially with the focus on how Sustainable Development Goals could be achieved through contributions of volunteers, which has generated, amongst other things, reflections on volunteer modalities, how an enabling environment can be created to support volunteering, and an increased focus on who volunteers and how they do it. This has further seen a rise in focus on how contributions of volunteering can be recognized and measured, especially with so-called ‘informal’ volunteering. The past period can therefore be understood as an ongoing attempt to promote greater recognition of the value of volunteering in all its forms and ways of investing in creating or improving an enabling environment by key actors involved in the volunteering infrastructure.

Recent trends in global volunteering

Around the world, people are facing massive change and an uncertain future. Income and wealth inequality is elevated and could rise to higher levels.³ The world anticipates further epidemics, pandemics and climatic disasters, as well as conflicts and wars that are forcing greater displacements and hardships than ever before. In these contexts, the indispensable role of volunteers in addressing development and humanitarian challenges surfaces sharply.

While COVID-19 produced huge loss of life, suffering and economic destruction, it also showcased the value of volunteering in real terms. The upsurge of grassroots volunteering represented “a sense of collective unity that developed into altruistic motivations and a sense of duty”³ across the globe. A recent meta-study found that the pandemic produced “increased episodic and task-based patterns of volunteering”,⁴ a development which may serve to weaken the distinction in valuing ‘formal’ over ‘informal’ volunteering,⁵ and possibly elevate the recognition of both forms in relation to their role in sustainable development.

² Volunteers are the lifeblood of communities, with an estimated 70% of global volunteer activity taking place ‘informally’ (i.e. direct, non-organizational mediated volunteering) (UNV, 2021); Volunteers are the engines that run civil society organizations (Dean, 2024; Perold & Graham, 2017); while corporate employee volunteers help businesses contribute to society’s shared value (Mati, 2023).

³ Kneale et al., 2023.

⁴ Perold et al., 2021a

⁵ Hustinx et al., 2022

The pandemic provides a useful focus in understanding trends in volunteering, some of which predated the pandemic, were perhaps accelerated, or took on new forms. Six trends are identified as particularly significant.

Adaptability. The pandemic demonstrated how, in the face of a sudden and complete global shut-down, grassroots volunteers, volunteer involving organizations (VIOs), governments and companies could re-organize themselves, adapt their activities, and innovate to respond to needs of the pandemic.⁶ Local organizations and mutual aid groups were able to provide essential services where local authorities could not provide these effectively.⁷ Within the formalized volunteer sector, the pandemic generated new relationships and forms of cooperation at local, national, regional and multinational levels, which a number of volunteer leadership organizations saw as a foundation for greater resilience in the future.⁸

This formulation of integrated volunteer modalities has been described as hybridity, a situation where different kinds of volunteer relationships and practice are combined.⁸ It is less clear whether this extends to the fluidity of transition between more formal and informal roles on the part of individual volunteers, and their multiple and sometimes simultaneous identities.

While the **adoption of digital technology** preceded the pandemic, it brought two things into focus: the crucial role of digital communication during the global shut-down, and the digital divide that drives inequality across the globe. For example, in Peru a women's movement relied on digital technology to keep mobilizing and supporting women (and men) during the pandemic, whilst advocating against the pervasive levels of inequality in digital access.⁹ In Asia, the need to build digital and communications capacity became paramount and the Singapore International Foundation pivoted its operations towards upskilling people and communities in digital skill sets, while turning one of its community service programs into e-volunteering.¹⁰ In some cases technology, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, surfaced new hybrids as is evident in the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) which considered the idea of piloting modalities of pairing local volunteers with international ones.¹¹ The question is how sustainable such experiments have turned out to be in the post COVID-19 context.

The pandemic changed the **profile of volunteering** as certain types of volunteers were forced to withdraw, leaving the field open to different participants. For example, levels of organized volunteering declined among older volunteers who were precluded owing to the health risks they faced from the virus. This created opportunities for younger volunteers to swell the ranks

⁶ Perold et al., 2021a.

⁷ Soden and Owen (2021) quoted in Kneale et al (2023)

⁸ Mati et al., 2022.

⁸ Baillie Smith et al., 2022.

⁹ Perold et al., 2021b.

¹⁰ Perold & Allum, 2023.

¹¹ Interview with JICA officials, Oct 01, 2020.

of volunteer involving organizations¹² In addition, with the repatriation of many international volunteers shortly after the lock-down in March 2020, local volunteers in partner countries stepped in to pivot donor funded programs in response to needs created by the pandemic.

Advocacy for **inclusivity and equal access to volunteering** has grown across diverse countries, especially as it relates to young people, women, girls, marginalized groups, refugees and LBGTQIA+ minorities.¹³ In the current uncertain and crisis-ridden environment, “a key principle behind an inclusive approach is that collective action will be more effective when people from diverse groups are able to trust each other and work together—particularly in times of crisis when the need for cooperation is high.”¹⁴ Inclusive volunteer involvement is made more challenging by deeply embedded biases towards race, class, gender and identity. These include devaluing and not recognizing the contribution of poor volunteers;¹⁵ seeing volunteer roles as gendered and thereby restricting the full participation of women in development;¹⁶ and valuing the knowledge of Western volunteers above that of equally qualified volunteers from the Global South.¹⁷ In giving voice to the need for inclusion, UN resolution 73/140 of 2018 encourages the participation and integration of all people in volunteering activities, including youth, older persons, women, migrants, refugees, persons with disabilities, minorities and other marginalized groups.¹⁸

We have also seen developments in **valuing volunteer contributions**. The role of community-based volunteers and other marginalized groups such as young people, women, and refugees has historically been overlooked across the world. For example, until recently the sector and its research agencies overlooked the role that refugees play in the global refugee crisis response. By failing to value the actions they take in their host communities,¹⁹ refugees’ voluntary efforts are marginalized.²⁰

Calls for greater recognition of all forms of volunteering are challenging unequal power relations in partnerships within the volunteer sector. Some countries in the Global South that receive international volunteers are demanding mutual recognition of local skills and abilities, and equitable partnerships in the volunteering space.²¹ Initiatives such as the

¹² Mati et al., 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lough, 2017, p.27

¹⁵ Institute of Development Studies/VSO, 2015, p.31

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lough & Matthew, 2013, p.17

¹⁸ In 2018 the General Assembly approved resolution 73/140 encouraging the participation and integration of all people — including youth, older persons, women, migrants, refugees, persons with disabilities, minorities and other marginalized groups — in volunteering activities. It also encouraged governments, in partnership with the United Nations, the private sector, civil society and others to integrate volunteerism into national development strategies. In addition, member states were encouraged to include information on the scale, contribution and impact of volunteerism in future voluntary national reviews of the SDGs.

¹⁹ Ménard, 2022. In addition, a major study in Uganda has shown how volunteering is central to the livelihoods and coping strategies of refugees. RYVU, 2024.

²⁰ According to the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, as of May 2024, the number of forcibly displaced people in the world has reached a staggering 120 million.

https://civil-protection-humanitarianaid.ec.europa.eu/what/humanitarian-aid/forced-displacement_en

²¹ Ibid.

‘Decolonize Volunteering!’²² project undertaken by CCIVS,²³ suggest that some mindsets about power imbalances in the volunteering sector are changing, while a recent study on inequality in volunteering research focuses on gaps in the knowledge base about volunteering, why these occur and how greater equity and cooperation can be achieved.²⁴

Shifts in **civil society space** have also had an impact on volunteering. Volunteer modalities are being shaped by political and ideological factors in different parts of the world. In countries experiencing declining democracy, deepening autocratic governance,²⁵ and the narrowing (in some cases closing down) of space for civic action, important forms of volunteering are evident in community-based social activism as well as direct support to vulnerable groups.²⁶ This is demonstrated by studies showing how volunteers from marginalized groups have been undertaking activities that deal with development challenges ranging across health, security of tenure, and economic empowerment, among others.²⁷

Key questions

1. What action is required, and by whom, to increase recognition for the value of volunteering and the contribution that is made by all forms of volunteering?
2. What support is required to help volunteers and volunteer involving organizations navigate the challenges and maximise the role and contribution of volunteers in sustainable development?

The role of key actors in supporting volunteering

Different actors in the volunteering ecosystem have distinct yet complementary roles in supporting and facilitating volunteerism. Volunteers bring their skills, time and commitment, but perform different roles depending on the context within which they volunteer. Labels and identities mirror their many functions: as activists in contexts of democracy, environmental

²² The Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service has produced a raft of toolkits, reading materials and videos to campaign against the coloniality in North-South relations in the volunteer sector. <https://ccivs.org/decolonise/>

²³ The Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service is an international NGO founded under the auspices of aegis of UNESCO in 1948. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/CCIVS#:~:text=The%20Coordinating%20Committee%20for%20International,field%20of%20International%20Voluntary%20Service.>

²⁴ Perold et al., 2023.

²⁵ Marina et al., 2024.

²⁶ Kneale et al., 2023, p.7.

²⁷ UNV, 2021, p.9.

conservation, and climate adaptation campaigns; as service providers in education, health and other social services; and as humanitarian aid volunteers for those who participate in humanitarian action and disaster relief (floods, wildfires, etc.).

Additionally, volunteers operate across multiple contexts and at different scales, often in close collaboration with multiple other actors and agencies – communities, VIOs, government, and corporates. This brings with it multiple complexities including inequalities in power and access to supporting resources based on gender; geography; the scale, level and type of volunteers; as well as types of organizations and their operations. As a result, different types and kinds of volunteers are differently valued.²⁸ For example, local volunteers contribute local knowledge, especially as first responders in their own communities. However, as earlier noted, they are not always as resourced and protected (and therefore not as valued) as those engaged through international voluntary service.

Going forward, there is a need to develop frameworks that ensure that all forms of volunteering, including those involved in ‘informal’ or ‘direct’ volunteering, are equally valued and supported by organizations, policies and laws. This is a task, as argued below, that governments, philanthropy organizations, IVCOs, other VIOs, and corporate entities, can undertake by providing or supporting enabling policy frameworks and resources for all forms of volunteering.

The role of government

Governments have a key role in providing an enabling environment for volunteering. This role includes enacting and implementing legal and policy frameworks, as well as providing funding support to volunteering activities and programs. Some governments, either directly or in partnership with civil society or intergovernmental organizations such as UNV, have set up special national and international volunteerism programs. In so doing they provide necessary funding and infrastructure to support volunteering, especially in areas that align with national development priorities and the achievement of SDGs, as well as, for some states, in areas of geopolitical interest.²⁹

²⁸ Perold et al., 2021a.

²⁹ Specifically, countries in the global North have invested in soft power through the influence of volunteers in their international volunteering programs such as Peace Corps for USA and VSO for the UK among many others, to promote cultural diplomacy, enhance international goodwill, and influence global development issues (See Sobocinska, 2017; Rieffel and Zalud, 2006).

At least 90 UN member states have enacted formal volunteering laws and policies.³⁰ Increased appreciation of the value of volunteering is evident in an analysis of data from Voluntary National Reviews³¹ undertaken in 2023, which shows that at least 73 member states report they have developed and integrated volunteering into their national development plans, strategies or policies.³² At the same time, this demonstrates the unevenness of outcomes. More than half of UN member states are yet to initiate specific volunteer policies to guide volunteerism, its resourcing, and recognition. In some cases, there are no laws and policies to safeguard volunteers.³³

Of course, formal changes are not sufficient in themselves. Integration of volunteering into national development priorities, strategies and plans may generate new models of volunteering support that enhance gender equality, social inclusion, the freedom to volunteer, participation, and the safety and security of volunteers. However, a serious question remains about the implementation of these laws and policies, and it should not be assumed that they are fully implemented or will translate into recognition or practical support for volunteering.

³⁰ <https://knowledge.unv.org/laws-policies-scheme>; UN data from UNV Knowledge Portal; <https://knowledge.unv.org/glossary>. Covered by these laws, policies and frameworks are definitions of what counts as volunteering in different contexts; the differentiation of kinds of volunteering; definitions of an enabling environment; the strategic integration of volunteering into existing national development priorities and plans; the role of different actors; and the volunteering infrastructure, especially the institutional arrangements to enable people to participate through volunteering.

³¹ Voluntary national reviews (VNRs) aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The VNRs also seek to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. <https://hlpf.un.org/vnrs> Between 2021 and 2023, the number of Voluntary National Reviews that identified the integration of volunteering into development plans, policies and strategies increased from 15% to 28%.

³² Drawn from UNV data on sectoral analysis from 2023. National Plans are defined as national plans, policy or strategy and includes Vision 2030 or 2050 documents. The analysis lists 150 countries of which 119 are identified as having a national plan or equivalent.

³³ Caregiving and domestic responsibilities limit the ability of women and girls to engage fully in volunteering in many countries. Addressing such gaps in volunteering practices and aspirations is vital to tackling exclusion and gender inequality.

The role of philanthropy and civil society ³⁴

Philanthropy can facilitate an enabling environment for volunteering through the support of infrastructure organizations including VIOs, community-based organizations, IVCOs, and their programs. In addition, given their persuasive power, philanthropy organizations can be critical players in persuading governments to create an enabling environment especially by enacting relevant policies that aid the recognition of volunteers. However, many mainstream philanthropy foundations have no active programs to support volunteering, especially activist volunteering. ³⁵

By contrast, civil society organizations (CSOs) recognize the value of volunteers to their survival. CSOs are at the heart of advocacy, mobilizing, organizing and managing volunteers and volunteering efforts in programs that support or enable the delivery of community services as well as in humanitarian contexts. In advocating for volunteerism, civil society continues to play a key role in highlighting its value and impact in society, as well as in advocating for an enabling environment. CSOs provide critical routes for people wishing to volunteer, be it locally, nationally or internationally. ³⁶ In addition, CSOs are active in resource mobilization efforts to fund volunteer programs. Therefore, CSOs provide critical links to donors, the private sector, and governments in mobilizing resources to fund volunteer programs. ³⁸

Role of the corporate sector

The corporate sector's role in volunteerism has grown significantly, especially through employee volunteering programs ³⁷ and through funding partnerships with NGOs ³⁸ or government-initiated volunteer programs as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. ³⁹ Through employee volunteering programs, for example, some companies allow

³⁴ We use an all-embracing concept of civil society to include the entire compendium of nongovernmental and nonmarket actors, agencies and structures within which volunteering takes place. These include NGOs (national and international), IVCOs, VIOs, and community-based organizations), education institutions, and faith-based organizations.

³⁵ A search on the Ford Foundation website using 'volunteer' appears to present many options but none are obviously about resourcing volunteer programs or activities. A similar search on the Wellcome Trust presents far more references to volunteers, but these seem to be primarily about volunteers for medical trials, not as active participants in development. This contrasts with citizen science approaches (Bhandari, 2024).

³⁶ In this organizing and managing role, CSOs perform a number of functions. For example, CSOs design volunteer programs, recruit, train and equip volunteers with skills necessary for specific tasks, as well as manage volunteers.

³⁸ In some cases, governments have incentivized cross-sector collaborations in support of volunteering by offering tax deductions for charitable donations by corporates as well as giving subsidies to CSOs that engage volunteers.

³⁷ IAVE, 2023.

³⁸ An example here is VSO's partnership with various corporates across different parts of the world to aid employee giving and fundraising; advocacy and influencing; innovative technology and services.

See <https://www.vsointernational.org/our-work/partnerships/corporate-partners>

³⁹ Mati, 2022.

their employees to take paid time off to volunteer for charitable causes, especially those aligned with their CSR goals; and companies may encourage and sometimes support volunteer activity outside of working hours. Additionally, businesses, in partnership with NGOs, have been at the forefront in advocating for an enabling environment for volunteering,⁴⁰ while also co-sponsoring volunteer initiatives by governments with a view to addressing specific societal challenges.⁴¹ In some countries, especially in jurisdictions where clear CSR policy frameworks have been enacted, corporates have aided volunteering by providing resources to civil society partner organizations.⁴² This suggests that legal and regulatory environments can compel or influence companies to engage in employee volunteering and other CSR-related activities. However, the voluntary nature of such actions has been a source of scrutiny and criticism.⁴³

Corporate employee volunteering is heavily overconcentrated on ‘formal’ arrangements with nonprofits or governments. There are exceptions where corporate volunteers have been encouraged to engage in direct support to other citizens in need.⁴⁴ This suggests that corporates can create innovative spaces for volunteering. What requires exploration, however, is how corporates can create spaces for members of local communities, who are not their employees, to volunteer. For example, support for sports teams and clubs leads to more opportunities for volunteer coaches. The essence here is that voluntary contributions to local activities could be a criterion for CSR engagement in addition to employee volunteering.

Key questions

3. **What needs to be done to ensure that governments in all parts of the globe provide not only the rhetoric of support, but the financial and practical investment that enables volunteering to flourish?**
4. **What types of innovative multi-sectoral partnerships are needed to ensure that key leadership within philanthropic foundations and the corporate sector play an active role in creating an enabling environment for volunteering?**

⁴⁰ The South African King IV Report framework is an example of such initiatives from the private sector that have been used to lobby for government and other stakeholder buy in, allowing the private sector to embrace sector-wide norms that incentivize CSR, and by extension, corporate employee volunteering.

⁴¹ See for example, IAVE (2023) for various examples of corporate sponsorship of employee volunteers’ engagement in education, environmental conservation, humanitarian disasters, etc.

⁴² Examples in Africa include South Africa and Mauritius where employee volunteering is embedded in CSR and is regulated by legislation(s) (Wachira & Berndt, 2019). In South Africa one example, Discovery Health, through its foundation, has established an innovative cross-sector partnership with local government (The City of Johannesburg) and nonprofit organizations in supporting the Orange Farm community (an underserved low-income neighbourhood) to tackle its most pressing needs in a comprehensive manner, through a five-year commitment (Mati, 2023).

⁴³ Mati, op cit. 2022.

⁴⁴ An example is Safaricom Foundation corporate employee volunteer program which has enabled the agency and creativity of its employee volunteers to choose what to support (ibid).

An enabling environment for volunteering

An enabling environment for volunteering is one that “works to maximize the benefits of volunteering for development outcomes and minimize the risks for volunteers.”⁴⁵ According to UNV, it

“...encompasses a suite of tools such as policies, legislation, schemes, bodies or programmes provided by public, non-profit and private sector actors (also defined as volunteering infrastructure). It is also made up of intangible forms of volunteering support such as a positive recognition of volunteering and volunteer groups, and the promotion of norms around the participation of all groups, including those furthest left behind.”⁴⁶

An enabling environment for volunteering, therefore, encompasses how volunteer infrastructures of public, non-profit and private sector organizations develop policies, legislation, volunteer schemes and programs, as well as specialist bodies to support volunteering.⁴⁷ However, what is the basis for describing an enabling environment in this way? UNV acknowledges the limited evidence of impacts of the tools alluded to and therefore focuses on specific areas of volunteer infrastructure including the legal environment, policies and schemes, gender and inclusion, as well as visibility, recognition, and advocacy. The existence of such a ‘suite of tools’ in any country has come to serve as an indicator of progress towards an enabling environment.

An enabling environment for all?

This leads us to a number of fundamental questions: an enabling environment for *which* volunteers, *which kind* of volunteering and in *whose interest*? Policies and plans that seek to include volunteers, by implication, cover only people who are freely giving of their time and skills in service to others and who identify *as volunteers*. This might apply to volunteer programs, where participants may be organizationally defined as volunteers, but in many parts of the world voluntary activity is not seen as *volunteering*. Often it is seen as a way of life or part of culture – ‘how we do things’.

⁴⁵ UNV Knowledge portal. “Such an environment is based on number of underlying principles: the freedom to volunteer, gender equality in volunteering, the safety and security of all volunteers, and the voice and recognition of volunteer groups. These principles can be realized in a number of ways including through the realization of rights, the promotion of norms and values, and the implementation of formal policies and/or legislation.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ This is also formally extended to “intangible forms of volunteering support such as a positive recognition of volunteering and volunteer groups, and the promotion of norms around the participation of all groups, including those furthest left behind.” Ibid.

Relating this to what constitutes an enabling environment for volunteering, it is hard not to conclude that the focus on legislation, policies, and strategies — taken together with the extent of recognition for volunteers — addresses a particular form of volunteering: one described in the sector as ‘formal’. In what sense does this approach to enabling environment address the situation faced by the majority of volunteers?

Additionally, volunteer infrastructure tends to work more easily with volunteers who self-define as volunteers and participate in the context of VIOs.⁴⁸ Volunteer organization networks operate between organizations at national and global levels where volunteers are perhaps too often seen as the delivery mechanisms of programs (e.g. achieving the SDGs), rather than active participants in their own community. Often ignored in such conceptions are people who define themselves as activists, and who are involved in mobilizations and advocacy on issues affecting their communities, nations, and even the global community.⁴⁹

The ‘rediscovery’ of community volunteers by some IVCOs as active participants in their own ‘development’ rather than objects of other people’s development programs, represents a small, positive step to recognizing the diversity of volunteer activity. However, in some sense it does so by moving people from the ‘informal’ to the ‘formal’ category and into a ‘program’. It still leaves open the question of what does an enabling environment look like for those not included in the volunteer ‘program’?

Investment in an enabling environment

An effective enabling environment requires investment. This may take many forms in addition to government policy and legislation. The level of **funding** support for volunteers is arguably directly connected to the value placed on their contribution. Considering that some volunteers are more valued than others, issues of equity in the volunteer experience highlight priorities in the enabling environment. For example, a study of refugee volunteers recommended that VIOs should set “transparent terms over remuneration and avoiding discrimination and uneven rewards, both between different refugees, and between refugees and national volunteers.”⁵⁰

The **safeguarding** of volunteers remains an issue of concern. The threat of infection during the pandemic prompted 82% of surveyed volunteer leadership organizations around the world to strengthen their safety protocols.⁵¹ In 2021 the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 76/131 requesting member states and the UN system to work together with volunteer involving organizations, including from civil society, to support efforts to enhance the

⁴⁸ Our view is that the terms ‘informal’ and ‘formal’ represent a particular mindset that privileges service and giving that takes place in Western organisational terms and denigrates grassroots forms of organisation as being less valuable.

⁴⁹ This is perhaps evidenced in the approach of volunteering organizations to climate change, where it tends to be seen as a program issue rather than an advocacy issue. See Allum et al (2020).

⁵⁰ RYVU Policy Briefing 1, Northumbria University, UK.

⁵¹ Mati et al., 2021.

protection, security and well-being of volunteers.⁵² Nevertheless, it seems some volunteers are better safeguarded than others⁵³ This indicates that issues of inequity connect to a lack of investment in certain types of volunteering, or that investment prefers to focus on specific volunteer activities.

The **development and adoption of standards** for volunteering practice represents a significant investment both by VIOs and the various networks that support them in ensuring the adoption of minimum standards for all volunteers. Policies and protocols that concern the safety and security of volunteers have been supported by the *Implementation guide: Standards to facilitate the safety, security and well-being of volunteers* produced by IFRC in 2023. The Global Volunteering Standard developed by Forum is a “framework to support volunteer involving organisations to better understand good practice, and to become more responsible and impactful in their work.”⁵⁴

Lack of recognition for the value of volunteering and the contribution of volunteers remains an issue that requires a strong **advocacy** response. For example, VIOs may not be well placed to advocate for volunteering or for issues arising from the activities of their volunteers. National and global networks have a potential role to play here but need both the resources and permission from members to do so. The attempt to influence the SDG process through the Volunteer Groups Alliance is one example that brings together 80 organizations and networks,⁵⁵ but this is closely linked to the UN system and is focused on influencing UN member states. There seems to be scope for the volunteering networks to engage in a wider advocacy strategy with the aim of securing greater investment in the field.

Rethinking an enabling environment

Rethinking our approach to an enabling environment for volunteering is not straightforward. Cultural factors mean that some key actors, notably governments and project funders, think solely in terms of formalized programs. Any serious attempt to engage the majority of volunteers in the years ahead has to adopt a different approach to an enabling environment that goes beyond government policy and implementation. This requires a more nuanced approach to volunteers than a simple categorization of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ since volunteers may operate in different contexts of varying formality or in different roles at different times. Unless all volunteers have the opportunity to play an active role in defining an enabling environment and how it can operate, it is hard to see how change can happen. A

⁵² UN (2021) Resolution 76/131. Fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Volunteers programme and twentieth anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers, adopted 16 December 2021. The resolution also calls upon member states to create and maintain, in law and in practice, a safe and enabling environment for volunteers. Policies and protocols that concern the safety and security of volunteers have been supported by the *Implementation guide: Standards to facilitate the safety, security and well-being of volunteers* produced by IFRC in 2023.

⁵³ Perold et al., 2021a.

⁵⁴ <https://forum-ids.org/global-volunteering-standard/> accessed 30 September 2024

⁵⁵ See <https://www.volunteergroupsalliance.org/> accessed on 7 October 2024

first step would be to reflect on how the term ‘informal’ contradicts ‘recognition’ of volunteering and to consider more appropriate terminology. It also demands a focus on how sustainable development is driven by community needs and ownership, and consideration of what this means for an enabling environment. Furthermore, it requires recognition of the multiple identities of volunteers and how terminology that ‘fixes’ them in a specific role fails to address that.

This is not an easy task – the challenge of converting national policy into local action is mirrored by the challenge of getting local action reflected in national support.⁵⁶ But there has been research into what policies and norms can assist in creating an enabling environment, effectively summarized by Lough in preparation for the 2018 SWVR:

Valuing and supporting civic spaces; inclusive policies to support local volunteerism—with a special focus on vulnerable groups; building incentives for participation; providing protections and safety guarantees for volunteerism; engaging volunteers in learning, evaluation and reporting; delivering specialized trainings to enhance the effectiveness or participation of volunteers; partnering with civil society, faith-based and corporate organizations to coordinate volunteer efforts; and supporting diverse person-centered solutions that influence social norms and community expectations.⁵⁷

There is scope for greater collaboration from across volunteering interests and networks to engage in a wider advocacy strategy with the aim of increasing recognition for the importance and impact of volunteering and securing greater investment.

Key questions

5. What needs to change to address the power dynamics and ensure that the diversity of voices of volunteers (women, young people and other marginalized groups (formally or informally organized)) play a key role in shaping an enabling environment for volunteering?
6. What needs to be done to generate the necessary investments to enable volunteers to fulfil their potential?
7. What needs to be done to enhance relationships between volunteering organizations and key stakeholders and decision-makers outside of the volunteering sector?

⁵⁶ Lough, 2017, p.41

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.41

Conclusion

This Challenge Paper outlines in broad strokes some of the current features of the volunteering sector across the world. On this basis, an evidence-based call to action for IVY 2026 can be crafted, reflecting the organizational and contextual needs and demands of the participants in this global process.

However, the nature of volunteering in different countries is shaped by the contexts in which volunteer action takes place on the ground. This includes different forms of volunteer-based organization in-country, social formations, resourcing levels, the purposes of volunteer action, participants in the volunteer movements, the impact of supportive or hostile policy frameworks, and the issues of power and equity which have been touched on above.

As we approach IVY 2026, there is a clear opportunity for a phased approach to generating a factual and contextually relevant set of recommendations to inform the Call to Action which this paper seeks to support. At the outset we would encourage volunteer networks and leadership organizations to facilitate inclusive multi-stakeholder conversations at national level. These would aim to identify, prioritize and document relevant factors that affect the recognition of and investment in diverse types of volunteering in those countries. Taking these outcomes into regional conversations can help to aggregate, refine and give weight to strategies that are most likely to succeed in increasing the recognition of and investment in volunteering in those contexts. Such an approach would give the opportunity for the voices of all volunteers to be heard and contribute to a widely owned call to action.

Consolidated list of questions

1. What action is required, and by whom, to increase recognition for the value of volunteering and the contribution that is made by all forms of volunteering?
2. What support is required to help volunteers and volunteer involving organizations navigate the challenges and maximise the role and contribution of volunteers in sustainable development?
3. What needs to be done to ensure that governments in all parts of the globe provide not only the rhetoric of support, but the financial and practical investment that enables volunteering to flourish?
4. What types of innovative multi-sectoral partnerships are needed to ensure that key leadership within philanthropic foundations and the corporate sector play an active role in creating an enabling environment for volunteering?
5. What needs to change to address the power dynamics and ensure that the diversity of voices of volunteers (women, young people and other marginalized groups (formally or informally organized)) play a key role in shaping an enabling environment for volunteering?
6. What needs to be done to generate the necessary investments to enable volunteers to fulfil their potential?
7. What needs to be done to enhance relationships between volunteering organizations and key stakeholders and decision-makers outside of the volunteering sector?

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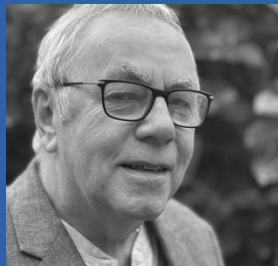
About the authors



Jacob Mwathi Mati PhD is a Professor and Deputy Director at the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social investment at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. Email jacobmati@gmail.com.



Helene Perold is an independent social research consultant in Johannesburg, South Africa, and formerly founder and director of Helene Perold & Associates (1993-2023), and Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOESA) (2003-2013). Email hperold@hpa.co.za.



Cliff Allum PhD is an Associate Fellow at the Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham UK. He previously worked in senior roles in the volunteering and international development sector. Email cliffallum@gmail.com.

