



International  
Association for  
Volunteer  
Effort



INSIGHTS PAPER

# Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering

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# Executive Summary

In December 2023, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2026 as the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, urging all stakeholders to work together to promote the vital role that volunteers play in ensuring just and sustainable societies.

In response to this call, this Insights Paper summarizes key findings from a global survey and a series of global dialogues that, together, captured voices of close to 14,000 volunteers and stakeholder groups from 164 countries responding to the question: **to better harness the power of volunteering towards sustainable development, what needs to change – and who has the power to change it?**

From the research, three Key Insights emerged:

**The Value of Volunteers.** Volunteering in formal and informal ways is widely recognized as an important mechanism to achieving local, national and global sustainable development goals. Volunteering benefits communities by facilitating social cohesion and building solidarity through individual and collective action. It also benefits volunteers through skills-building and improving well-being. However, these contributions tend to be under-acknowledged and poorly measured.

**Enabling Environment for Volunteers.** Volunteering programs and initiatives require a coherent volunteering infrastructure, supportive policies and sustained cross-sector collaboration, but these elements are often missing or fragmented. For volunteering to thrive, inclusion and equity is important, ensuring that everyone – especially marginalized groups – can access and lead volunteering efforts.

**Power in Volunteering and Protection of Volunteers.** Unequal power dynamics that can impact volunteering opportunities need to be addressed. In relation to international volunteering, this could be through shifting towards models rooted in local leadership, practices and reciprocity. Safeguarding and protecting volunteers, especially in conflict zones and humanitarian settings, is more urgent than ever.

Drawing from these findings, four areas of recommendations are put forward:

**Championing the Value of Volunteering.** Volunteering needs to be more systematically recognized, valued, and celebrated. There is a clear call to shift from symbolic appreciation (“thank you”) to systemic recognition through policies, funding, and integration into local, national and global strategies.

**Enabling Environment for Volunteering to Make a Difference.** Invest in a strong volunteer infrastructure to create enabling environments to maximize volunteering’s impact.

**Significant and Sustained Investment in Volunteering.** Sustained, equitable and ethical funding and resourcing needs to be provided as a core pillar of strong and inclusive volunteering.

**Safeguarding of Volunteers.** Creating safe, reciprocal, and locally-led volunteering spaces that uphold dignity and safeguard volunteers and the individuals with whom they engage.

The challenge is clear: for volunteering to realize its full potential, we need to collectively identify the key actions needed, across diverse contexts and stakeholder groups, to unlock greater investment and create enabling environments for volunteering to thrive.

## Glossary of Terms

### Volunteering Infrastructure

An enabling environment, operational structures and implementation capacities to promote volunteerism, mobilize volunteers and support them in their work. Operational structures include schemes through which volunteers are mobilized, deployed and supported. Implementation capacities include functional and technical resources of volunteer organizations to adapt to changing circumstances, function at high standards of efficiency and achieve results. (Source: UNV SWVR 2018)

### Volunteering

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. (Source: UNGA (2002). *Recommendations on Support for Volunteering*. 10 January. A/RES/56/38.)

### Formal Volunteering

Formal volunteering takes place through organizations, associations or groups, typically by volunteers with an ongoing or sustained commitment to an organization, who contribute their time on a regular basis. (Source: SWVR 2022)

### Informal Volunteering

Informal volunteering occurs directly between individuals and communities without being mediated by an organization. (Source: SWVR 2022)

# Why This Paper and Why Now?

In December 2023, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2026 as the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development, urging all stakeholders to work together to promote the vital role that volunteers play in ensuring just and sustainable societies. This call comes at a time of polycrisis<sup>1</sup> where urgent and complex global challenges – ranging from the climate emergency and ongoing conflicts to widespread poverty and unemployment – intersect and deepen inequalities. We have witnessed a rise in authoritarian governments and the shrinking of civil society and the spaces where people come together to solve problems in their communities.

The challenge is clear: for volunteering to realize its full potential, we need to collectively identify the key actions needed, across diverse contexts and stakeholder groups, to unlock greater investment and create enabling environments for volunteering to thrive.

Marking the International Volunteer Year 2026 (IVY 2026), this Insights Paper brought together the voices of close to 14,000 people from 164 countries to respond to the question: **to better harness the power of volunteering towards sustainable development, what needs to change – and who has the power to change it?**

A global survey of 10,053 respondents from 164 countries captured the views of both volunteers and organizations that support or mobilize them. Alongside the survey, 126 dialogues involving nearly 4,000 participants were conducted at global, regional, and national levels. These included 13 global dialogues convened by major international coalitions, 13 regional dialogues across six world regions, and 100 country-level dialogues across 74 countries. We heard from a wide range of stakeholder groups: from youth, government institutions and the private sector to philanthropic entities, volunteer-involving organizations and volunteers themselves. This breadth ensured that the findings reflect a genuinely global diversity of perspectives.

The findings that are presented in this Insights Paper directly shaped a [Global Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering](#), a collective statement urging volunteer-involving organizations, national leadership for volunteering organizations, the private sector, funders and governments to act decisively and invest in enabling environments where volunteering can flourish. This Insights Paper should therefore be read both as background to, and as a companion piece of, the Global Call to Action: together, they form a global mandate for change.

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<sup>1</sup> More recently, there has been renewed use of the term polycrisis by international organizations, such as UNESCO, to describe this phenomenon. The World Economic Forum describes polycrisis as 'where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part'. See <https://polycrisis.org/lessons/where-did-the-term-polycrisis-come-from/#:-:text=The%20Report%20uses%20the%20term,%2C%20water%2C%20metals%20and%20minerals/>

**This Insights Paper:**

- Summarizes and presents findings from the survey and the global dialogues, arranged according to common themes across these data sets.
- Identifies areas of importance and priorities, based on the survey and dialogues.
- Provides the evidence-base or foundation for the Call to Action – explaining underlying issues identified by the research.

## Journey to the Call to Action

The Global Call to Action is the outcome of an eight-month consultative and participatory process that engaged close to 14,000 participants across 164 countries. The process was facilitated by a scoping group of leading organizations in the volunteer space: the International Association of Volunteer Effort (IAVE), the Global Volunteering Forum (Forum), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), UNICEF Generation Unlimited, the Volunteer Groups Alliance (VGA), and the United Nations Volunteers Program (UNV) who served on an ad hoc basis.

The consultative process began in February 2025 with the publication of a Challenge Paper<sup>2</sup>, which set out key trends in volunteering (e.g. the changing profile of volunteers, adoption of digital technology, and inequalities in volunteering) and posed strategic questions about what a shared global vision for the future of volunteering could be. The paper also examined how different stakeholders can shape the enabling environment for volunteering.

The Challenge Paper provided the foundation for four online exploratory dialogues. These dialogues were international in reach. Participants tested ideas posed by the Challenge Paper and raised preliminary focus areas, ranging from financing volunteering programs, safety and security of volunteers, and policy support on volunteering.

Insights from these early dialogues directly informed the design of a global survey<sup>3</sup> that was disseminated worldwide. In parallel, organizations and groups in 74 countries hosted Global Dialogues<sup>4</sup> which provided an opportunity for people to reflect, in more

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<sup>2</sup> A call to Action for the Future of Volunteering: Framing a Global Dialogue for the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development. <https://forum-ids.org/challenge-paper-a-call-to-action-for-the-future-of-volunteering/>

<sup>3</sup> The survey tool was piloted to a small group of 11 respondents which included youth volunteers, representatives from volunteer-involving organizations, corporates, and many more. Results of the pilot were used to further refine and improve the survey prior to dissemination.

<sup>4</sup> A Global Dialogue Facilitators' Pack was developed to ensure that common questions were discussed across different gatherings. A copy of this pack can be accessed here: <https://www.iave.org/iavewp/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/IAVE-Global-Dialogue-Facilitators-Pack-Call-to-Action-for-the-Future-of-Volunteering.pdf>. The dialogues were conducted online or in-person.

depth, on important issues around volunteering, particularly in relation to their local, national and global contexts.

Findings from the survey and dialogues were synthesized into this Insights Paper (see Appendix B for a note on the analysis strategy), which provided a basis for developing the Call to Action. The paper underwent three stages of review. First, the Scoping Group provided preliminary feedback on an initial draft. A revised draft was shared with a Sense-Making group drawn from civil society networks, governments, academic institutions, and volunteer-involving organizations (see Appendix C for full list of reviewers). Finally, the Sense-Making group met in September 2025 online and in-person in London, UK, to consolidate feedback and strengthen the Insights Paper.

The London meetings also initiated the drafting of the Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering. Drawing on the Insights Paper, the Scoping Group and the Sense-Making Group reflected on the most urgent and cross-cutting themes that had emerged and used these to shape a set of preliminary Call to Action statements. These statements formed the basis of the [Call to Action document](#), which was drafted and subsequently reviewed, first by the Scoping Group, and later by the wider Sense-Making Group.

## Key Insights

The insights that emerged from the survey and dialogues are grouped into three Insight Areas summarized below:

### The Value of Volunteering

Insight 1: Volunteering is essential for achieving the SDGs

Insight 2: Volunteering benefits both communities and individual volunteers

Insight 3: Volunteering modes and motivations are changing; organizations need to recognize them and catch up

Insight 4: Volunteering's value remains poorly recognized and celebrated

Insight 5: More evidence and research on volunteering are needed

### Enabling Environment for Volunteering

Insight 6: Effective and consistent volunteering infrastructures are critical for an enabling environment, yet often missing

Insight 7: Policy and legal frameworks may be limited in some contexts and where



available, the implementation needs to be strengthened

Insight 8: Volunteer management is underdeveloped

Insight 9: Cross-sectoral alliances are vital in strengthening volunteering, but there are coordination and leadership gaps

Insight 10: Inclusion and equity in volunteering is seen as non-negotiable, but far from achieved

Insight 11: Volunteering programs and initiatives are under-resourced

## Power in Volunteering and Protection of Volunteers

Insight 12: Providing a supportive environment that addresses the power imbalances and empowers volunteers in national, community and organization led initiatives is important

Insight 13: Safeguarding volunteers is more urgent than ever

# The Value of Volunteering

## Insight 1: Volunteering is essential for achieving the SDGs

*“Volunteerism should no longer be viewed solely as charitable work but as a strategic, multidimensional contributor to sustainable development”. – Tanzania national dialogue*

Participants consistently emphasized that volunteering is a vital force in achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Insights from the dialogues show how volunteers are seen as strengthening community resilience, fostering social cohesion, and contributing meaningfully to both national and global goals.

Survey results reinforce this message. Nearly 9 in 10 respondents reported that their volunteering supports at least one SDG, and around 1 in 8 said their efforts contribute across all of them. The top five areas of reported impact were:

- SDG 3: Good health and well-being (43%)
- SDG 4: Quality education (36%)
- SDG 13: Climate action (30%)
- SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities (24%)
- SDG 10: Reduced inequalities (23%)

These findings make clear that volunteering is often seen by volunteers and

practitioners not as an ‘add-on’ or ‘nice to have’ but as an essential driver in localizing and achieving the SDGs. For example, dialogues pointed to how volunteers contribute to achieving better education outcomes, increased awareness on climate change and improving access to health services.

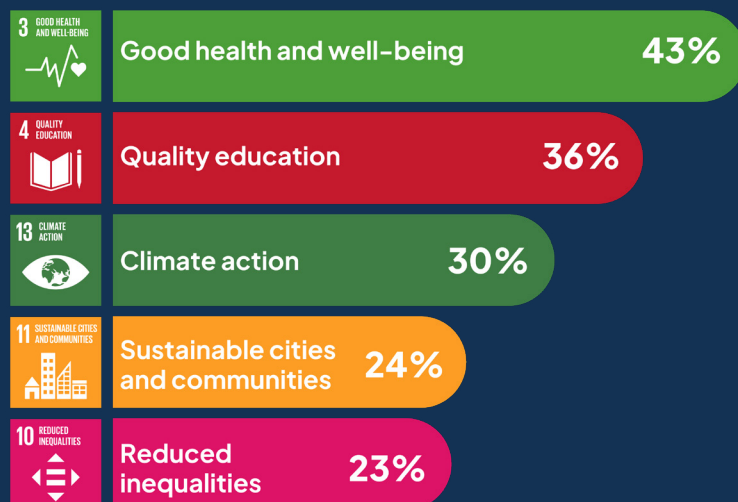
## Insight 2: Volunteering benefits both communities and individual volunteers

*“Volunteering is a civic practice for community recovery and a valuable social asset. Volunteering connects diverse members of society, restores relationships, and helps resolve conflicts”. – Republic of Korea national dialogue*

Beyond contributing to Sustainable Development Goals, the survey and the dialogues highlighted how volunteering strengthens both individual volunteers and the communities they serve. Three-quarters of the survey respondents said volunteering improves lives and makes a positive difference, while over half framed it as a way of ‘giving something back’ or promoting solidarity and care for vulnerable groups. Volunteering led to:

- strengthening democracy and building civic communities from below
- enhanced citizen participation: individuals, often regardless of background, become actors of change, not only observers
- creating more peaceful societies

### Where Volunteers Are Making the Most Impact



Many also emphasized the personal benefits of volunteering: developing a sense of connection (64%), improving mental and physical health (51%), gaining new skills (35%) and work experience (42%), and expanding social networks (18%). According to the dialogues, volunteering also helped facilitate a sense of self-discovery, improvement of connections and learning new skills. In the dialogues, there was an emphasis on the links between volunteering and employability, particularly in reference to young people. During the Uganda dialogue, a participant shared, “Volunteering is central to livelihood ecosystems among youth refugees...” Others observed how young volunteers gained networks and learned employable skills through volunteering. Dialogues emphasized that these need to be recognized more systemically for example, through certifications, diplomas, and micro-credentials.

Insights from the dialogues point to the need for volunteering to be embedded into education programs. This should be done at an early age to nurture a culture of civic responsibility. As one dialogue contributor in India noted, “Volunteering should begin in schools, not just as credits, but as a family or community value that lasts beyond academia”. Others echoed this by linking volunteering to skills development and future employment opportunities, underscoring its role in building both active citizenship and professional development.

### **Insight 3: Volunteering modes and motivations are changing; organizations need to recognize them and catch up**

*“We must tailor volunteer roles to today’s youth – not the other way around. Most youth are drawn to causes, not chores – they want to make a difference”. – Global dialogue*

New ways and patterns of volunteering are emerging, particularly among young people. The pandemic, the climate crisis, and economic pressures are all shaping when and how people get involved. A few dialogues noted declining volunteer participation in their organizations. Others noted that many volunteers now volunteer based on causes instead of organizations, while also facing urgent pressures that compete with their time.

New opportunities are opening. Emerging technologies, including AI-powered volunteer matching platforms and digital volunteering opportunities, were seen as vital tools to expand participation. Global dialogue participants stressed both the promise and the caution: AI can connect us, but it must not ‘erase the soul of service’. Digital and virtual volunteering, which has long been an important mode of volunteer participation, were recognized not only as legitimate and valuable contributions but also to address barriers to access, especially in contexts where physical presence is limited. This reflects the need to recognize and support emerging forms of engagement such as digital and hybrid volunteering models.

The dialogues emphasized that changes require organizations to ‘catch up’ and meet volunteers where they are. Opportunities need to be flexible, modular, and inclusive, with recognition that many young people face constraints from education or work. As one Global dialogue participant put it, “Youth should feel they are choosing, not being assigned. It must be their journey. Flexible micro-volunteering, innovation hubs, and creative forms of engagement were all seen as ways to make volunteerism more relevant”.

#### **Insight 4: Volunteering’s value remains poorly recognized and celebrated**

*“More than 20 years after the first International Year of Volunteering was commemorated, the contribution made to communities is still invisible in many countries, and therefore not recognized”. – Latin America regional dialogue*







Despite the wide-ranging impacts, the value of volunteering is still largely unrecognized, especially more informal ways of volunteering. As one dialogue participant shared, “We need to broaden the boundaries of volunteering to include informal volunteering and everyday acts of kindness.” In the survey, for instance, respondents felt there is a moderate understanding of the value of volunteering across stakeholder groups. Community-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), along with international and national NGOs, as well as donors and funders, were perceived to have a stronger appreciation of volunteering, with many rating them as understanding it very well. By contrast, educational institutions, governments, the wider community, and especially the corporate sector were viewed as having only a moderate or limited understanding. This highlights a recognition gap between civil society actors and other important stakeholders.

The dialogues echoed this concern. In Benin, the dialogue pushed for an important call: “In Benin, volunteering is rooted in our culture of solidarity. It’s time to recognize this wealth and propel it to new heights for the SDGs.” However, there was an emphasis on a more fundamental issue: how volunteering as a social practice is understood in the first place. Several misconceptions have been identified:

- volunteering as a plug-in or ‘ancillary’ to development programs as opposed to an essential element
- volunteering as ‘cheap or free labor’ as opposed to a practice worthy of investment
- volunteering as ‘nice to have’ as opposed to an integrated strategy for local development

These perspectives highlight the urgent need to reframe volunteering as a strategic asset that deserves recognition, resources, and protection.

## Misconceptions About Volunteering

Misconceptions	vs.	Reality
 “Add-in” to development		 Essential element of development
 “Cheap/free labor”		 A practice that requires investment
 “Nice to have”		 A strategic asset for local development

At the same time, participants cautioned against over-reliance on volunteers, especially where they are expected to substitute for properly funded services. For example, in Canada, dialogue participants noted that essential services are increasingly dependent on volunteers, often women, seniors, and newcomers, raising concerns about sustainability and fairness. According to a participant during a dialogue in Canada: “Volunteering is meant to enhance nonprofit work but now it’s being expected to replace it. To maximize impact, volunteering must be supported, protected, and positioned as a complement, not a replacement, for inadequately resourced systems”.

### Insight 5: Evidence and research on volunteering are needed

*“We need research, documentation, and storytelling to inform national policies and shift public perception around the role of youth and community volunteers in sustainable development”. – Tanzania national dialogue*

Dialogues highlighted the importance of strengthening the evidence base for volunteering through research and impact measurement. Participants expressed the need for in-depth research on volunteering trends and shared tools to capture the long-term and often hidden outcomes of volunteer work, emphasizing the need to go beyond ‘anecdotal evidence.’ Such research is essential in advocating for the value of volunteering, building a stronger case for investment in volunteering, influencing financial donors, and informing government and community partners.

# Enabling Environment for Volunteering

## **Insight 6: Effective and consistent volunteering infrastructures are critical for an enabling environment, yet are often missing**

*“Volunteering in the Philippines is constantly evolving. While the Filipino people’s traditional bayanihan spirit remains strong, today’s volunteering calls for more than just willing hearts: it requires structured support, professional management, and sustainable resources”. – Philippines national dialogue*

All the good that volunteering can facilitate is not a given. Volunteering – both informal and formal – needs the right infrastructure to thrive. Volunteering infrastructure could be understood as support structures that allow volunteers to maximize their contribution to community life and sustainable development – this can include aspects such as available and effectively enacted policies, funding, and recognition and visibility (see also Glossary of Terms). In the survey, an enabling environment is defined as one that works to maximize the benefits of volunteering and minimize the risks to volunteers.

When asked about the presence of enabling environments across different levels, survey respondents felt more positively about the enabling environment in their organizations (53% rated it as good or very good) as compared to the wider community (39%) and at national levels (29%). This shows a clear gap in broader support structures and policies needed for volunteering to thrive.

## **Insight 7: Policy and legal frameworks may be limited in some contexts and where available, the implementation needs to be strengthened**

*“If every African country had policies and frameworks to recognize volunteers’ contributions, it would encourage more people to get involved”. – Africa regional dialogue*

In terms of national policies, legislation, or standards on the protection and support of volunteers, many of the respondents were unsure (32%) whether these exist. Others, about 13%, explain that there are no policies in place. A majority know that policies exist but felt (30%) they are ineffective while others (26%) say that they are effective.

This concern also emerged during the dialogues. Many expressed a clear policy gap in their contexts where there is a lack of comprehensive national volunteering frameworks. Where they exist, they are often fragmented, underfunded, or poorly implemented.

## **Insight 8: Volunteer management is underdeveloped**

*“We’re asking a lot from volunteers but not resourcing volunteer managers to support them. If we want volunteers to thrive, we need to fund the people who support them”. – Australia national dialogue*

A recurring theme in both the survey and dialogues was that volunteer management needed more professional recognition, training, and investment. Dialogues emphasized that staff responsible for coordinating volunteers do so only as part of their existing role, often without dedicated time, tools, or resources. This leads to gaps in how volunteers are supported, motivated, and retained. Several participants noted that effective volunteer engagement requires skilled management, not just goodwill. As one response from the European dialogue pointed out: “There is a need for better training for volunteer managers and a recognition of volunteer management as a professional discipline”.

Survey data further supports this. Around 48% expressed that responsible and responsive volunteer management needs to be prioritized to create an enabling environment, while 33% noted the need for supportive and organizational policies and standards of good practice.

This lack of capacity means that volunteers sometimes face unclear roles, inadequate orientation, and inconsistent follow-up, which can discourage long-term commitment. It also means organizations miss opportunities to harness volunteers’ skills strategically. Calls were made for volunteer management to be seen as a specialized profession, with structured training pathways, qualifications, and career development, like other areas of nonprofit management.

## **Insight 9: Cross-sectoral alliances are vital in strengthening volunteering, but there are coordination and leadership gaps**

*“A functional system requires the presence of a dedicated public body or interdepartmental mechanism to coordinate volunteering policy”. – Montenegro national dialogue*

Volunteering is sustained and strengthened when responsibility is shared across sectors. Governments, civil society, the private sector, and communities all have a role to play in resourcing and reinforcing volunteer action. Some noted the absence of dedicated bodies to coordinate volunteering policy or provide cross-sectoral alignment.



Ways to work together could include public-private partnerships to co-invest in volunteer infrastructure, alliances between governments and businesses, and joint projects between governments, NGOs, and educational institutions. There was also a strong encouragement to mobilize other sectors, such as religious groups. A dialogue noted: “In Brazil and similar contexts, volunteering is often tied to religious charity rather than seen as professional or structured civic engagement”.

These partnerships need to be supported by structures that enable constructive and impactful collaboration. Suggestions ranged from formalizing intersectoral alliances through legislation and shared monitoring mechanisms and creating knowledge exchange platforms to sharing best practices.

### **Insight 10: Inclusion and equity in volunteering is seen as non-negotiable, but far from achieved**

*“Volunteering must be open to and inclusive of all groups, ensuring equity of access for everyone, regardless of their personal circumstances. Organizations must be accountable to volunteers, not just donors. This includes adequate training and support, ongoing mentorship, and protection from racism and bias”.*

#### **– Ireland national dialogue**

When asked how easy it is to volunteer in their contexts, more than half of the respondents (54%) said it was easy or very easy, suggesting that in many contexts volunteering seems accessible. However, nearly a third of the respondents (31%) felt that it was neither easy nor difficult, while 13% expressed that it was difficult or very difficult, which points to potential obstacles.

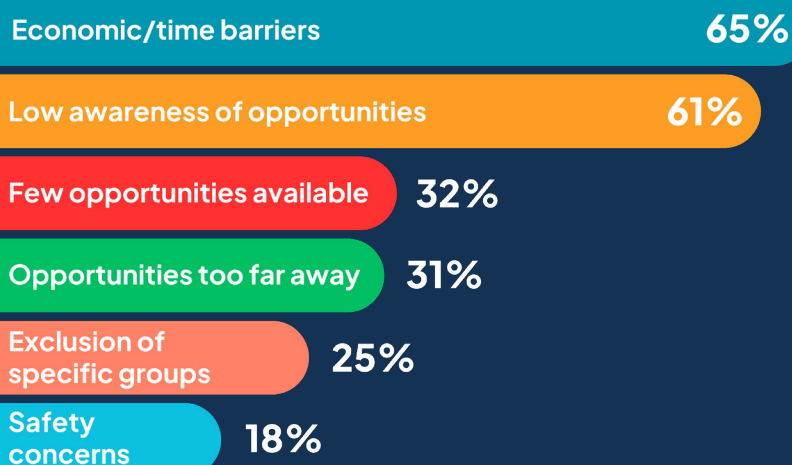
Survey data points to specific barriers. The most common challenges were socio-economic constraints such as limited resources for transportation, meals, or balancing work and volunteering (65%). Closely following were limited knowledge of available opportunities (61%) and not enough volunteering opportunities in some contexts (32%). Geography was another factor, with 31% noting that volunteering opportunities are located too far away. In the dialogues, some noted that volunteering opportunities were mostly in cities with less in rural and underserved communities. A quarter of respondents (25%) pointed to a lack of access for certain groups, including people with disabilities, women, and LGBTQI+ communities, while 18% identified risk and safety concerns as deterrents.

Respondents highlighted administrative processes as part of volunteer recruitment as a barrier, describing that there is sometimes “too much bureaucracy to be accepted as a volunteer” or that “volunteer participation requirements are too demanding.”

Lack of time and competing responsibilities, from full-time jobs and academic pressures to caregiving duties, were also common constraints, compounded by the limited flexibility of many volunteer opportunities. Financial barriers were highlighted as a



## Barriers to Inclusion and Access in Volunteering



persistent obstacle. During the dialogue in India, for example, a participant shared: “Volunteering must be accessible to all, not just the privileged. This means offering curated experiences, removing economic barriers, and increasing outreach and visibility.”

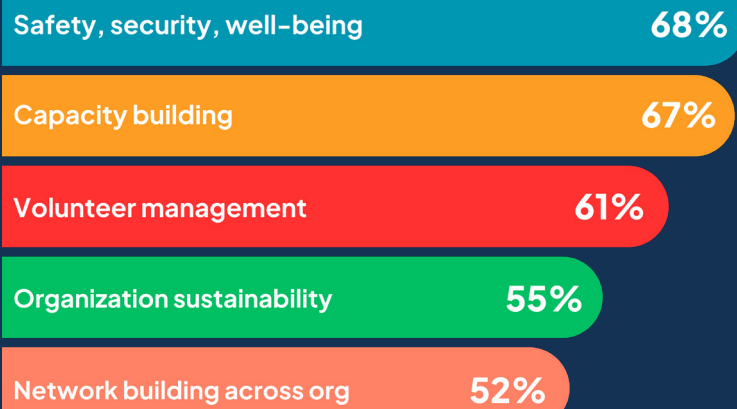
Other dialogue participants emphasized the need to broaden access to youth, rural youth, elderly people, persons with disabilities, unemployed people, and marginalized groups. When these are not addressed, insights from the dialogues emphasize that volunteering might counterintuitively cause inequalities, especially in local communities. Participants during the European regional dialogue called attention to the persistence of the ‘classic volunteer’ profile, such as those who are white, well-educated, middle-class, and stressed the importance of engaging non-traditional and underrepresented groups, including people with disabilities and marginalized communities.

### Insight 11: Volunteering programs and initiatives are under-resourced

*“Many volunteer projects and initiatives are run on passion, but not funds”. – Ghana national dialogue*

While there is general agreement on the social value of volunteering, this does not translate to the resources it receives. Respondents consistently observed inadequate financial support for volunteering initiatives – both formal and informal – across organizational, community, and country-levels. National and community-level initiatives were seen as severely underfunded, with over half of respondents rating investments at these levels to be insufficient or very insufficient. Strong investment in volunteering is rare, with only a small number of respondents (4-6%) believing that financial support is excellent. A participant at the Palestine dialogue noted: “Limited or

## Priority Areas for Investment Towards Volunteer Development



restricted funding continues to affect NGOs' ability to offer a high-quality volunteering experience. Without sufficient resources, many organizations struggle to provide meaningful engagement, training, or support for volunteers".

Respondents deliver a strong message that financial investment towards volunteer initiatives, particularly in terms of their safety, security, and well-being (68%); capacity building (67%); and volunteer management (61%) need to be prioritized. Other significant priorities were focused on organizational development, such as sustainability of volunteer-involving organizations (55%) and network-building across organizations (52%).

Whom do the respondents see as the stakeholders most responsible for greater investment in support of creating enabling environments? Over 80% expressed that it should be local and national governments – highlighting the dominant sentiment that public authorities should primarily drive funding towards volunteering programs with complementary support from the private sector (61%) and philanthropy groups and foundations (53%).

# Power in Volunteering and Protection of Volunteers

## **Insight 12: Providing a supportive environment that addresses the power imbalance and empowers volunteers in national, community and organization-led initiatives is important**

*“International volunteering must evolve – equal access and mutual respect are non-negotiable”. – Global dialogue*

Unequal power dynamics that shape who gets to volunteer, how, and on whose terms must be actively addressed. Across the global dialogues, participants highlighted how funding structures, organizational hierarchies, and international-local relationships can at times reinforce such an imbalance – limiting local voice, defining volunteering through Global North assumptions, or not treating volunteers as equal partners. Addressing these inequalities aligns with broader calls for decolonizing volunteering systems, ensuring that communities set priorities, have ownership, and are not marginalized in decision-making.

In terms of international volunteering, participants highlighted the need to dismantle saviorism and address entrenched power imbalances in who participates and whose narratives dominate in the international volunteering space. This involves shifting from a charity mindset to one rooted in solidarity, reciprocity, and local ownership. There is also a need to decentralize where knowledge about volunteering is located. The Africa regional dialogue proposed an important challenge: There was strong support for South-South and South-North exchanges, allowing African expertise in volunteering to be shared globally, not just received. A dialogue in the Arab region emphasized the need for more localized approaches to engaging volunteers, even in the same regions: “We need to localize volunteering strategies; Arab countries differ too much to have one uniform approach”.

## **Insight 13: Safeguarding volunteers is more urgent than ever**

*“Many of my fellow volunteers have been targeted. We urgently need international protection and concrete enforcement of our rights under international law”. – Palestine national dialogue*

Volunteers and the communities they engage with must be protected and safeguarded. Volunteering, at a minimum, needs to be secure, safe, non-exploitative, and dignified. In the survey, 68% of the respondents identified the safety, security, and well-being of the

volunteers as the most important and urgent area for investment. Similarly, over 51% stressed the need for policies and provisions that ensure the safety and protection of volunteers as a key element in an enabling environment for volunteering.

This was echoed in the dialogues. A need for urgency was expressed in relation to volunteering in conflict zones and crisis areas. Volunteers in Palestine and other conflict-affected regions reported being directly targeted and called for international protection frameworks and protection of their rights.

Even in more stable conditions, some dialogue participants emphasized the need for safety standards and protection of volunteers, ensuring that they are not exploited and have safe working conditions. This includes physical safety, mental health support, insurance, and risk assessment. Another dialogue emphasized policies that protect volunteers' rights in the workplace, addressing issues of exploitation or marginalization.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations were drawn from the insights above – a combination of priorities from the survey and themes from the dialogue. There are four areas of recommendations: (1) champion the value of volunteering (2) build an enabling environment for volunteering to make a difference (3) significant and sustained investment (4) safeguarding of volunteering spaces.

In each of the Areas, there are specific actions and these are arranged according to priority based on the survey (see Appendix D for the ranking). The statements have been expanded, and additional actions added considering the findings from the dialogues.

### Championing the Value of Volunteering

Volunteering needs to be more systematically recognized, valued, and celebrated. There is a clear call to shift from symbolic appreciation (“thank you”) to systemic recognition through policies, funding, and integration into local, national and global strategies.

1. The value of volunteering needs to be communicated via a wide range of channels, including social media, using storytelling and evidence-based approaches.
2. Involve volunteering organizations in developing preparedness and response plans and in supporting community resilience.
3. Publicly highlight and celebrate the value of volunteering in all its forms: civil society organizations and government bodies establish award programs (e.g. annual Volunteer Awards) that raise the profile of volunteers in-country and even internationally.

4. Measure the different and wide-ranging contributions of volunteers.
5. Invest in research to understand motivations, cultural differences, and new forms of volunteering.
6. Develop internationally shared tools and measurement frameworks to assess the social, economic, and developmental contribution of volunteering.

Other recommendations to champion the value of volunteering:

7. Educational institutions formally accredit volunteer hours and skills through school credits, scholarships, internships, and micro-credentials.
8. Corporations adopt formal policies that allow staff to dedicate work hours to volunteering, counted as part of their performance and career progression.
9. Integrate volunteering or service learning into national curricula at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels to promote civic responsibility and leadership from an early age.
10. Recognize different forms and modalities of volunteering.

## Enabling Environment for Volunteering to Make a Difference

Invest in a strong volunteer infrastructure to create enabling environments to maximize volunteering's impact.

1. Governments to develop local and national policy frameworks that recognize and invest in volunteering as a key developmental approach across wide-ranging public services: health, education, and youth development being the most common suggested areas.
2. Ensure the safety, security, protection, and well-being of volunteers by creating and promoting frameworks and action on the protection of volunteers, especially in conflict zones and establishing and monitoring codes of conduct to prevent exploitation of volunteers as unpaid replacements for permanent staff.
3. National Leadership for Volunteering Organizations to advocate for volunteering, provide capacity building for volunteer-involving organizations and create supportive volunteering networks to share knowledge and strengthen the volunteering infrastructure.
4. Ensure inclusive practices across the volunteering journey: from recruitment through participation to exit and re-engagement.
5. Investment should first strengthen the experience and protection of existing volunteers (through safety, safeguarding, and skills development) and improve organizational practices (such as volunteer management), before expanding recruitment.
6. Volunteer-involving organizations to improve volunteer management practice through personal and professional development of volunteer managers

7. Facilitate cross-sectoral collaborations and establish state-sanctioned institutions to coordinate policy, stakeholder bodies and ensure accountability in policy implementation.

Other recommended actions:

8. Set up national volunteer databases or registries to track participation, safeguard rights, and connect volunteers with opportunities.
9. Ensure opportunities are accessible to marginalized groups.
10. Remove/minimize financial and administrative barriers to participation.
11. Provide flexible volunteering formats (online, part-time, hybrid) to accommodate varying capacities and life stages.
12. Develop practices for safe and accessible use of online/digital volunteering.

## **Significant and Sustained Investment in Volunteering**

Sustained, equitable funding and resourcing as a core pillar of strong and inclusive volunteering.

1. Increase core government funding for volunteer programs.
2. Encourage private sector co-financing of volunteer initiatives, matched with tax incentives where possible.
3. Promote innovative financing models, such as common volunteer funds, crowdfunding, and regional volunteer service funds, especially for smaller NGOs and volunteer-involving organizations.
4. Corporations/Private Sector/Businesses to set aside a percentage of their CSR budget to support the development of volunteer management for their not-for-profit partner organizations.

## **Safeguarding of volunteering spaces**

Creating safe, reciprocal, and locally led volunteering spaces that uphold and safeguard the dignity, safety, security and well-being of volunteers and the individuals with whom they engage.

1. Involve volunteers directly in decision-making.
2. Design international volunteering schemes to avoid saviorism, ensure reciprocity, and strengthen local ownership of programs.
3. Protect the rights of volunteers and volunteer organizations to organize, participate, and advocate freely in civic life.

# Appendix A. Demographics of Respondents

## Survey

- A total of 10,053 people participated the global survey.
- Of these, 73% (7,376) answered from their perspective as a volunteer, while 27% (2,677) responded as representatives of organizations (non-governmental or corporate) that support or mobilize volunteers.
- Among those who answered as volunteers, the largest share are local volunteers (77%, 5,171), followed by national volunteers (10%, 655), international volunteers (7%, 475) and corporate volunteers (2%, 114).
- Volunteers also differed in how they participate: 35% (2,325) volunteer with an organization, 31% (2,068) volunteer informally (such as helping out neighbors), and 28% (1,905) do both.
- Among those who responded as representatives, more than half came from volunteer-involving organizations (52%, 1,319). Others included national leadership organizations for volunteering (20%, 497), corporations and private sector actors (11%, 268), government agencies (8%, 192) and funders (2%, 42).
- In terms of age, respondents were relatively evenly spread: 28% aged 41–55 (2,215), 27% aged 56 and above (2,108), 26% aged 26–40 (2,095), and 19% aged 25 and under (1,515).
- Responses came from 164 countries, with the largest share from South Korea\* (43%, 3,421), followed by China (311), Nigeria (221), Portugal (192) and Chinese Taipei (191), alongside a wide distribution across other countries.

## Global Dialogues

- A total of 126 dialogues were conducted, gathering 3,925 participants.
- Thirteen (13) global dialogues brought together participants from different parts of the world. These were hosted by global volunteering coalitions such as the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the Big 6 Global Youth Organizations, as well as IAVE, Forum, and the Volunteer Groups Alliance.
- Thirteen (13) regional dialogues were conducted across six (6) regions: Africa (4), Latin America (2), North America and the Caribbean (2), Asia Pacific (2), Europe (2), and the Arab Region (1).

- One hundred (100) country-level dialogues were conducted across 74 countries, with several hosting more than one dialogue:
  - China (6), Mexico (4), Chinese Taipei, Ghana, India, Madagascar, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (3 each).
  - Countries hosting two (2) dialogues each: Algeria, Benin, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ethiopia, Ireland, Kenya, New Zealand, Peru, Republic of Korea, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).
  - One (1) dialogue was conducted in each of the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Botswana, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Croatia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Gambia, Greece, Hong Kong SAR, Indonesia, Israel, Liberia, Macau SAR, Malawi, Mongolia, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Panama, Paraguay, Philippines, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Russian Federation, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Slovakia, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, Togo, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Uruguay, Vietnam, and Zambia.

**\*Note:** Although 43% of survey responses came from South Korea, the consultation process that formed the basis of this insights paper also included responses from 164 countries and was complemented by over 120 dialogues held globally, regionally and nationally, ensuring the findings reflect a broad diversity of perspectives.



## Appendix B. Analysis Approach

The global survey was conducted using SurveyMonkey, which provided built-in tools for both analysis and presentation. For questions that used a Likert scale (e.g., ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”), results were calculated using a weighted average; meaning that stronger responses carried more influence in the overall score. For questions requiring simple selections (such as “select all that apply” or “choose your top option”), results were ranked according to the number of times each option was chosen. For ranking questions, responses were calculated using a reverse weighted scoring system, where the first-ranked option received the most points, the second slightly fewer, and so on, to reflect priority order.

For the global dialogues, each host was asked to submit a short report (up to 300 words) summarizing the key messages from their discussion. These reports were analyzed in NVivo (a qualitative analysis software), where responses were coded by the researcher and grouped into themes. This process helped identify the insights that appeared most frequently across different dialogues.

AI Declaration: In the survey, some questions invited participants to provide “other” or additional answers beyond the listed options. Given the large number of responses and the use of multiple languages, ChatGPT was used to translate and summarize these inputs. The summaries were then reviewed, and relevant quotes and insights were identified to complement the survey and dialogue analysis.

# Appendix C. Members of the Scoping Group and the Sense-Making Group

## Scoping Group

<b>Nichole Cirillo</b>	Executive Director, International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE)
<b>Sandra Koch (observer)</b>	Team Lead for IVY 2026, United Nations Volunteers Programme
<b>Bayarmaa Luntan</b>	Manager, Volunteering, Youth and Education Development, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>Wendy Osborne</b>	Senior Consultant, International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE)
<b>James O'Brien</b>	Executive Director, Global Volunteering Forum
<b>David Ponet</b>	Senior Advisor, UNICEF, Generation Unlimited
<b>David Styers</b>	Coordinator, Volunteers Group Alliance

## Sense-Making Group

<b>Dr. Cliff Allum</b>	Third Sector Research Centre, Birmingham University
<b>Karol Arambula</b>	My World Mexico
<b>Hiba Awaysa</b>	Sawaed19
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<b>Adjmal Dulloo</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)
<b>Blessing Ewa</b>	Young Advocates for a Sustainable and Inclusive Future
<b>Dr. Jurgen Grotz</b>	Institute for Volunteering Research, University of East Anglia
<b>Rahim Hassanali</b>	Habitat for Humanity International
<b>Denise Hayward</b>	Volunteer Now
<b>Sandra Koch</b>	United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV)
<b>Vicky Lovelock</b>	Co-ordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS)
<b>Andronica Mabuya</b>	Discovery Ltd
<b>Dr. Shewarega Meshesha</b>	African Union
<b>Lucie Morillon</b>	France Volontaires
<b>James O'Brien</b>	Global Volunteering Forum
<b>Wendy Osborne</b>	International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE)
<b>Helene Perold</b>	Helene Perold Associates
<b>David Ponet</b>	UNICEF Generation Unlimited
<b>Gauri Rajadhyaksha</b>	Tata Sustainability Group
<b>Verity Smith</b>	Freshfields
<b>David Styers</b>	Volunteer Groups Alliance (VGA)
<b>Hattaya Wongsangpaiboon &amp; Teclah Ponde</b>	VSO International

# Appendix D. Prioritization of Key Actions Based on the Survey

Overall, survey respondents were asked to rank key actions across the three areas in order of priority. The results are as follows:

## Key Actions to Champion the Value of Volunteering

1. Communicate the impact of volunteering
2. Involve volunteering organizations in developing preparedness and response plans and in supporting community resilience
3. Publicly highlight and celebrate the value of volunteering in all its forms
4. Measure the contribution of volunteers

## Key Actions Towards an Enabling Environment for Volunteering to Make a Difference

Governments to create legislation, policies and frameworks to support and develop volunteering, integrating volunteering into national policies and engaging volunteering organizations in the process.

1. All stakeholders ensure the well-being and protection of volunteers.
2. National Leadership for Volunteering Organizations to advocate for volunteering, provide capacity building for volunteer involving organizations and create supportive volunteering networks to share knowledge and strengthen the volunteering infrastructure.
3. All stakeholders ensure equality of access to volunteer opportunities.
4. Volunteer-involving organizations to implement effective volunteer management practice, including the personal and professional development of volunteers.
5. Access to adequate funding to support volunteering
6. All stakeholders facilitate cross-sectoral collaborations

## Key Actions towards Providing Significant Financial Investment in Volunteering

1. Governments to provide funding to support national leadership and networks for volunteering.
2. Philanthropy to invest more in capacity building to support and develop volunteering.
3. Corporations/Private Sector/Businesses to set aside a percentage of their CSR budget to support the development of volunteer management for their not-for-profit partner organizations.

## About the Author

### Dr. Chris Millora, Ph.D.

Dr Chris Millora is a researcher with an interest in youth activism, volunteering and informal learning. He has led various research projects on social action and sustainable development including as Lead Researcher of the UN Volunteers' 2022 State of the World's Volunteerism Report and the Global Campaign for Education's global report on youth and student organizing. Chris is currently a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Education and Social Justice at Goldsmiths University of London where he heads the MA Social Justice in Education Programme. His first book *Local Volunteering, Adult Learning and Social Change in the Philippines* was published by Bloomsbury in 2025.



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