



# Diaspora Volunteering:

## A Comhlámh Discussion Paper

### Background

The model of diaspora volunteering emerges within the context of increasing worldwide population movements and shifting global migration trends.

**Diaspora volunteering refers to providing migrants or individuals who have familial ties, heritage or links, or those who were born in a country different to where they now reside, the opportunity to engage in a volunteering programme in their country (or region) of birth, origin or heritage.**

Diaspora volunteers can be first- and/or second-generation migrants, or even subsequent generations, but all have a connection with their countries of heritage. Diaspora volunteerism is often proposed as a measure to help reverse the 'brain drain' phenomena that many developing countries have experienced, by allowing their global diaspora community to donate their time, skills and expertise through the mechanism of international volunteering.

In Ireland, as the population has grown to include many different nationalities - the 2011 Irish Census records more than half a million people from 196 different nationalities - it is natural that the concept of diaspora volunteering should begin to emerge. Comhlámh began to explore this model of volunteering in 2013, as it channels and leverages the commitment of many new communities who now live in Ireland, but who still have substantial connections with their countries of birth or heritage. In November 2013, Irish Aid hosted a meeting with African communities in Ireland to explore the potential contribution of their diaspora to international volunteering. Diaspora, including the global Irish diaspora, have long been relied on for financial remittances, support and mentoring, and creating transglobal networks for their fellow citizens. Diaspora volunteering brings this activity to a level that allows diaspora communities to contribute to global development and to share their skills and expertise, often combined with a deep understanding of local needs and culture, with communities in their countries of origin or heritage.

### What is Diaspora Volunteering?

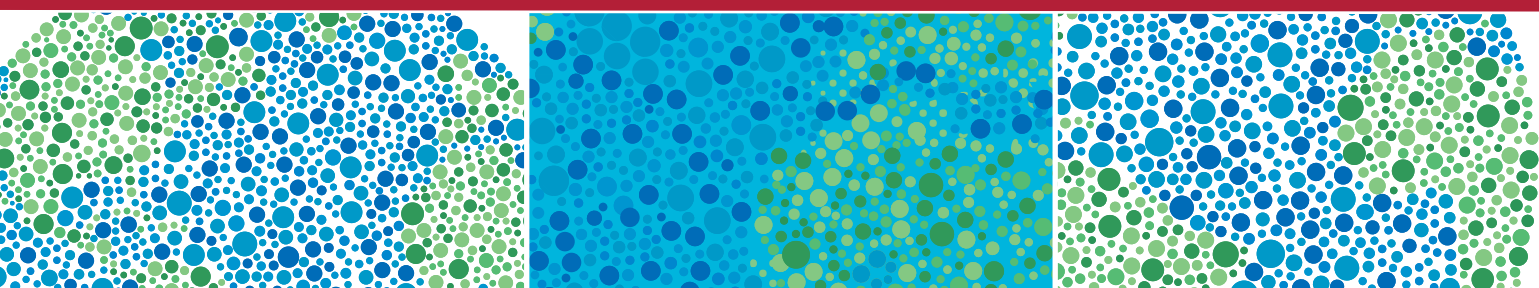
Diaspora volunteering leverages and engages volunteers

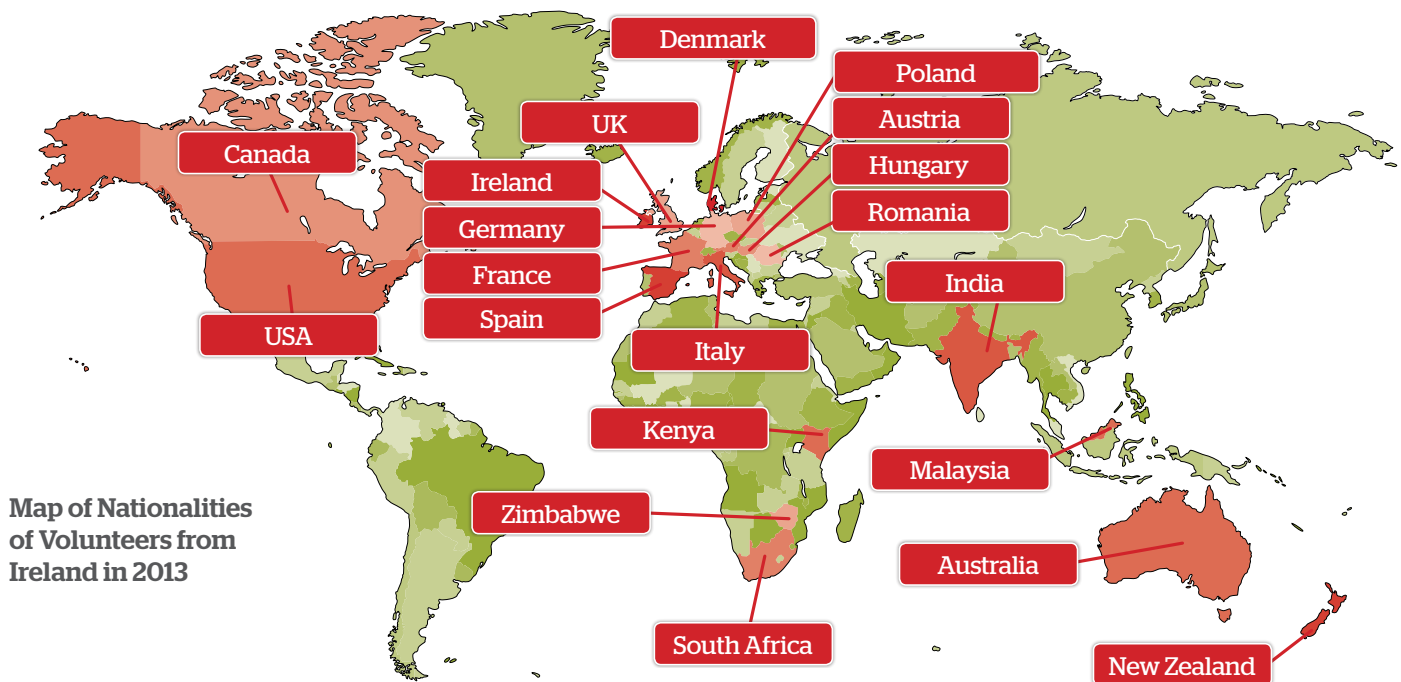
from diaspora communities and connects them with international volunteering programmes. Its unique benefits include the fact that it enables a volunteer sending agency (VSA) to draw on an individual's specific skills, knowledge, and connection with their countries of origin, while also allowing the individual to make developmental, financial and professional contributions to their communities 'back home'. Since Comhlámh's establishment in 1975, it has supported volunteers and development workers going to the Global South. For the purposes of this paper, our focus is primarily on volunteers travelling from Ireland to countries included on the OECD's DAC List of official development assistance recipients. European Union (EU) nationals and countries are not included in this analysis, although they may both send and receive volunteers and have significant populations residing in Ireland. For example, a Polish national who lives in Ireland but who travels to volunteer in Poland is not, for the purposes of this paper, viewed as participating in an international diaspora volunteering programme, as s/he is an EU national travelling to volunteer in another EU country.

The features of diaspora volunteering tend to lead to little data or information being recorded. Very often, it is informal, independent, led by an individual or family members, and based around small-scale local or community-level activities. Diaspora volunteering may also be linked to remittance flows into the region or area of the volunteer's ancestry or extended family. As a result of these features, diaspora volunteering often occurs beyond and out of sight of conventional international volunteering programmes and VSAs, and its true extent is generally not known nor documented.

### Research on Diaspora Volunteering from Ireland

There exists little comprehensive information on diaspora volunteering from Ireland. Possibly the first attempts to begin to formally capture this information are the Comhlámh surveys, collating and examining data on international volunteering from Ireland in 2012 and 2013. Both surveys asked VSAs if their international volunteering programmes included diaspora volunteering. The results show that it was offered by two VSAs, or 5% of survey respondents, in 2012 and six VSAs, or 13% of





**Map of Nationalities of Volunteers from Ireland in 2013**

respondents, in 2013, indicating some annual growth in this model of volunteering. The surveys also asked VSAs the nationality of their volunteers, which indicates some relevant information on diaspora volunteering. In 2012, 6% of international volunteers from Ireland were from countries outside of the EU. In 2013, they were 3% of the volunteer cohort, demonstrating a decline in the numbers of non-EU volunteers between 2012 and 2013. The results from the 2013 survey show that volunteers from Ireland consisted of 20 different nationalities (including Irish nationals), however, only four of these countries receive official development assistance, namely: India, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The responses to this survey question can be seen in the map above. However, it is important to state that many immigrants to Ireland may, in time, become Irish citizens, so this data does not provide a complete or robust picture of potential annual diaspora volunteers from Ireland. In addition, much of the information or knowledge on diaspora volunteering emerges from anecdotal awareness of individual members who are volunteering. This information is often not captured or documented, and is therefore difficult to assess and report.

Responses from the 2013 Comhlámh survey indicate that in 2013, volunteers from Ireland travelled to 47 countries across the globe. When the data from the 2013 survey and the 2011 Irish Census is compared, the countries that received international volunteers from Ireland in 2013 and that also have significant migrant populations in Ireland (between 1,001 and 10,000, as recorded in the 2011 census) emerge and include: Brazil, Ghana, the Philippines, India, Moldova, Thailand and South Africa. This indicates that there are volunteer programmes and volunteering opportunities provided by VSAs in Ireland to countries with sizeable populations living in Ireland, which could potentially lead to tapping into these diaspora communities to inform, design or staff international volunteering programmes. However, given the significant population of Nigerians living in Ireland (almost 18,000, according to the 2011 Census), it seems surprising that Nigeria did not emerge in the

2013 Comhlámh VSA survey responses on countries in which international volunteers from Ireland worked.

A report by VOSESA, commissioned by Comhlámh in 2013, highlighted the model of diaspora volunteering and provided global examples of where it has been implemented. The report suggests that pairing diaspora volunteers with their communities of heritage or origin may reduce many of the power imbalances and potential cultural challenges that come with international volunteering. It proposes that diaspora volunteering can allow skills transfers, address capacity challenges, and foster an environment of diaspora contribution to development beyond traditional remittances. The VOSESA report also proposes that given the numbers of professionals leaving parts of the developing world to seek opportunities for employment or study elsewhere, members of diaspora communities can now be recruited to volunteer in their countries of origin, which, in some way, can assist in reversing 'brain drain' and could reduce the capacity and skills constraints faced in many developing countries.

## Benefits of Diaspora Volunteering

Diaspora volunteers can bring value to their home countries and assist in reversing human capital outflows due to skilled and educated citizens choosing to work and live elsewhere. In general, there is less adjustment time needed for diaspora volunteers, as they already possess the language requirements and are familiar with the culture, customs and bureaucracies in the countries in which they are volunteering. Reduced pre-departure training may also be a feature of diaspora volunteering programmes. As a result, this could lead to cost and time savings for VSAs. Diaspora volunteers can act in diplomatic roles for their new home countries, which can lead to opening up trade and business opportunities, and provide longer-term connections between a volunteer's new home country and his/her country of

origin. Diaspora volunteers may have extended family, friends or contacts with whom they can stay while volunteering, which can result in cost savings during their placement. The added value of harnessing diaspora volunteers ultimately lies in their innate knowledge of their countries of heritage and language skills, both of which allow for rapid commencement of volunteer activities on arrival and often a close connection with the host community and project, which may enhance trust and productivity. Harnessing new migrant communities and diaspora-led organisations and groups operating in Ireland and involving them in international volunteering from Ireland can also offer insightful, relevant and pertinent advice to VSAs in relation to programme design and feasibility analysis, as well as pre-departure training and in-country orientation for volunteers from Ireland.

## Barriers and Challenges to Diaspora Volunteering

Much of the value of international volunteering lies in volunteers' long-term engagement with development issues, their potential for repeat volunteering, and their ongoing involvement upon return from placement. This is no different for diaspora volunteers. As many of the initiatives that diaspora volunteers are supporting within their countries of origin are small-scale, the feasibility of enlarging them, making them more cost-effective, and scaling up may prove to be a particular challenge for this model of volunteering. Upon returning to their countries of origin, members of the diaspora may experience diversions and demands not experienced by other international volunteers, such as requests for support, time and money, which can lead to distraction from the volunteer role and community, and extended family pressure and expectations on volunteers. The issue of safety for international volunteers may possibly be reduced for diaspora volunteers due to their familiarity with their host countries, culture, geography and language, but it is not eliminated. As many migrants leave their countries of origin due to safety concerns, it is also possible that a diaspora volunteer could experience heightened risk and safety concerns, so special consideration of individual circumstances must be given by VSAs in diaspora volunteering programmes. Costs for participating in international volunteering programmes are known to be a barrier, and this can also be true for diaspora volunteers, who may have additional visa fees to pay.

Many of the migrants who come from countries that qualify for official development assistance (ODA), and are therefore part of international volunteering programmes, may seek asylum and refugee status in Ireland. As a result of being granted refugee status, or other forms of recognised international protection, individuals are unlikely to be able to travel to their countries of origin. This poses significant challenges to diaspora volunteering from Ireland, as those best placed to participate in such programmes may not be able to return due to safety, visa or legal-status concerns, or may not be able to re-enter Ireland upon completion of an international volunteering placement. Deliberation of these important issues is needed by VSAs, and solutions such as volunteering in neighbouring regions or countries should be considered for potential diaspora volunteers. Online or virtual volunteering could also provide a solution to this issue, as

travel is not required, but the willingness to volunteer is still harnessed and the skills of a volunteer are utilised.

## Examples of Diaspora Volunteering Programmes

Although some Irish-based VSAs are offering opportunities for diaspora volunteers and encouraging diaspora volunteering, there are still very limited examples of such programmes. More established and larger diaspora volunteering programmes have been offered by the American International Health Alliance, Cuso International (based in Canada) and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO). These volunteer programmes offer examples of the positive results of involving diaspora volunteers and the commitment of some governments to supporting this model of volunteering, which may include offering preferential funding to initiatives that clearly involve diaspora communities. In time, given the small growth of diaspora volunteering offered by Irish-based VSAs (captured in the recent Comhlámh surveys), there should be more examples of such programmes originating from Ireland.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Involving diaspora communities in international volunteering opportunities and programmes is a natural step as the population of Ireland becomes more diverse. In Ireland, as the number of second-generation immigrants (who can act as important links between Ireland and their countries of heritage and extended family) grows, they should be invited to engage with volunteering programmes, particularly with the substantial number of international youth volunteering programmes operating from Ireland. There exists an opportunity for volunteer sending agencies (VSAs) in Ireland to engage with diaspora communities and organisations in Ireland to augment their international volunteering programmes and potentially develop symbiotic partnerships. Informing diaspora communities of potential volunteering opportunities may require the use of different advertising and promotional routes, in addition to creating links and networks with diaspora-led groups and organisations active in Ireland. It may also require supports for engagement with international development through remote, virtual and online volunteering opportunities, in cases where visas or the return to country of origin are not feasible. Involving diaspora communities in pre-departure training and orientation, volunteer programme design and volunteer mentoring are also aspects of international volunteering that can be enhanced by consulting with, and leveraging knowledge and expertise from, diaspora communities.

The added value of engaging with diaspora communities cannot be underestimated, but it may need to be done with a cognisance of some of the barriers and challenges outlined, and with a solution-focused and inclusive approach. A greater focus on diversity and inclusion in volunteer recruitment and volunteering programmes from Ireland could lead to greater involvement of migrant and diaspora communities, and the potential engagement of future generations, who are Irish citizens yet have parents from, or family connections in, developing countries.

Comhlámh needs to support diaspora volunteering in VSA programmes and to do this within an overall context of supporting inclusivity in volunteering by opening international volunteering opportunities to all those living in Ireland. Further research by Comhlámh will also be required to document growth in this model of volunteering and to assess its impact on VSAs, volunteer programmes, host communities and volunteers themselves.

## About Comhlámh

Established in 1975 in Ireland, Comhlámh (meaning 'solidarity' in Irish) is a dynamic, independent membership organisation working with development workers, volunteers and activists. Comhlámh is committed to advocating for a just and equitable world, setting standards and promoting good practice. Comhlámh promotes responsible, responsive international volunteering for global development and monitors and supports the implementation of the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice (CoGP) among Irish volunteer sending agencies (VSAs). Comhlámh also provides comprehensive information, training and supports to volunteers and development workers before their placements and when they return home.

## Glossary

- **Brain Drain:** The emigration of skilled, educated individuals from a developing country into a more developed country, subsequently leading to skills shortages and human capital loss in the emigrant's country.
- **DAC List:** DAC is the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The DAC List shows the countries and territories eligible to receive official development assistance (ODA).
- **Diaspora Volunteering:** This refers to providing migrants or individuals who have familial ties, heritage or links, or those who were born in a country different to where they now reside, the opportunity to engage in a volunteering programme in their country (or region) of birth, origin or heritage.

- **Online Volunteering:** Volunteering in which an online system or network (accessed through a computer, mobile device, etc.) plays a primary role in the volunteer undertaking or delivering tasks. It may also be referred to as virtual volunteering.
- **Volunteer:** One who freely renders a service or takes part in an enterprise. International volunteering in development includes both long-term and short-term placements, which can be organised by both governmental and non-governmental agencies.
- **Volunteer Sending Agency (VSA):** These are agencies that arrange international volunteer placements, mostly in developing countries. The agencies may not be for profit, or for profit.

## References, Further Reading and Information

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American International Health Alliance [www.aiha.com](http://www.aiha.com)  
Cuso International [www.cusointernational.org](http://www.cusointernational.org)  
Diaspora Matters [www.diasporamatters.com](http://www.diasporamatters.com)  
Voluntary Service Overseas [www.vso.ie](http://www.vso.ie)



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

This paper has been researched and written by Comhlámh, with funding from Irish Aid. The views expressed herein are those of Comhlámh and can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of Irish Aid. By virtue of preparing this report or otherwise in connection with this research, Comhlámh will not assume any responsibility or have any liability to any third parties.

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