

IVCO 2022 FRAMING PAPER

A NEW DAWN:

Strategic Pathways for the Future of Volunteering in Development

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Introduction



The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about both challenges and opportunities for organisations working with volunteers to achieve sustainable development. Resources have been affected and in-person volunteering disrupted, but there have also been great strides in innovation and agility. This takes place alongside an ever-strengthening global movement for climate justice, greater recognition of the need for localisation, changes in how people volunteer and what organisations and communities need, and much more.

Recognising the multitude of challenges and opportunities this rapidly changing environment creates, the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) (<https://forum-ids.org/>) sought to collectively develop a strategy for volunteering in development for the next three to five years, for both its members and the wider sector. It offers possible pathways to help organisations prioritise and effectively navigate the post-COVID environment.

This document summarises the key points and considerations emerging from a collaborative process based on 31 conversations with Forum members and 10 external stakeholders between May and August 2022. It is written by Nick Ockenden, an independent research, evaluation and strategy consultant specialising in international volunteering (www.nickockenden.com).

The International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) is the most significant global network of organisations that work with volunteers to achieve sustainable development goals. Forum exists to share information, develop good practice and enhance cooperation across the volunteering in development sector. Forum achieves this through convening, research, and standards.

For more information and to join Forum, visit forum-ids.org.

The Strategy

This strategy is structured around five themes:

01 Responding to and learning from the pandemic.

02 Addressing decolonisation.

03 Tackling wider trends.

04 Evolving approaches to volunteering programming.

05 Developing the evidence and knowledge base

Each section outlines the key issues and challenges facing organisations working with volunteering in development and presents considerations for their future development.

1.

Responding to and learning from the pandemic

A. RESILIENCE, FLEXIBILITY AND INNOVATION

Numerous organisations have successfully adapted their volunteering provision during the pandemic and learnt a great deal. Frequently, they do not want to return to pre-COVID business as usual and see the changes as part of their evolution and innovation. Not all organisations are, however, thriving and many continue to experience greatly reduced income sources, suspension of activities and uncertainty about volunteer recruitment in the future.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Strategically innovate in the future and continue to improve. Innovation is not only for times of crisis but also for periods of stability.
- There is, however, no space for complacency, and COVID-related learning should continue to be built upon and shared.
- Invest in horizon scanning and foresight work to continue to understand the changing environment as best as possible.
- Continue to demonstrate value with donors and do not take for granted their understanding of the work and its changing needs.

B. COVID-19 AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

The pandemic forced many to make rapid changes to their programming, most notably by increasing national and South-South volunteering; introducing and expanding e-volunteering provision; forming new partnerships, especially for advocacy work; and focusing on impact and evidence work. Many of these developments had long been in the pipeline but the pandemic provided an urgent reason to introduce them and for donors to accept them.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Work closely with donors, especially those who may be sceptical, to help increase their understanding that the changes made in response to the pandemic should not be seen as temporary measures to survive, but as a long-term evolution of how volunteering in development functions.
- Have the confidence to not apply for future donor funding if donor values do not match those of the organisation.

C. OPENING UP THE CONVERSATION BEYOND COVID

The pandemic is not over, its effects to last for years to come, but those spoken to felt that now is the time to discuss other important topics. There is a real risk that the impact of major trends that pre-date COVID could be sidelined, such as shrinking space, the rapidly changing role of technology, the cost-of-living crisis, anti-globalisation, altering work and leisure patterns, and conflict and migration. This is not about denying the major negative impact COVID has had on many organisations.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Make space for the discussion of other topics but do not ignore the ongoing evolution of COVID, the learning gained to date and the journeys undertaken by organisations.
- Re-engage with major, important and long-term challenges such as shrinking space and think critically about how this will affect volunteering and possible responses.
- Continue to work with and support those who have been especially hard hit by COVID and are taking time to recover.

2.

Addressing decolonisation

A. CO-PRODUCTION WITH COMMUNITIES

Effectively addressing decolonisation needs to involve challenging and sometimes existential questions: What is the place of North-South volunteering? Why are volunteers from the North often valued differently than those from the South? How can structural barriers to South-North volunteering be addressed? To what extent do Northern organisations need to consider new organisational structures?

Those spoken to in the development of this strategy agreed that co-production, in which the agency of all partners and communities is recognised and facilitated, is the best way to help decolonise volunteering in development. The challenge remains how best to ensure previously excluded voices are heard in a genuinely collaborative process and how to navigate wider structural barriers and power imbalances.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Prepare to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Addressing decolonisation and pursuing co-production with communities needs to involve difficult and challenging conversations, some of which may question the purpose of organisations' work and their established ways of acting. This needs incremental change, reflection and learning.
- Continue advocacy with donors and partners in the North to demonstrate the value of co-production with local communities.
- Ensure arguments and discussions are based up-to-date academic thinking and theory but work to ensure they remain practical and deliverable rather than disconnected and remote theoretical debates.
- Northern-based organisations should challenge themselves on how they are structured to deliver their work and their programmes. Pay and organisational structures should be reviewed and adapted where relevant (for example, dual-pay structures replaced by single-pay structures; where and how the organisation is headquartered and whether devolved structures might work better; the balance of Southern staff and voices throughout organisations, especially in senior management).
- If co-production is already taking place, critically ask how inclusive the approach is and whether those currently involved genuinely represent their communities.

B. THE CONTINUING CONTRIBUTION OF NORTH-SOUTH VOLUNTEERING

Decolonisation, localisation and co-production do not, however, mean an end to North-South volunteering. Where it is based on genuine partnership with communities fully involved in decisions about what volunteers do, it can be highly beneficial.

Voluntourism is one form of North-South volunteering, and those spoken to as part of this work discussed how it contrasted with their programming and had potential to cause harm to communities. There was a desire to sufficiently distinguish placements, especially shorter volunteer placements. There was also, however, recognition that in giving priority to the volunteer's motivations and wishes, voluntourism programmes often present an attractive and marketable offer to prospective volunteers, which could be learnt from.

Many organisations are finding it harder to recruit long-term volunteers from the North. Very low unemployment rates in some countries can make options for paid work more attractive than volunteering, but some people also value flexibility and an ability to dip in and out. The rapid growth of issues-based activism like Fridays for Future, for example, shows how people can 'do good' in ways very different from highly structured volunteering.

North-South volunteering also highlights embedded power imbalances. Large numbers of organisations working with volunteering in development chose to repatriate their international volunteers during COVID as an appropriate response to protect their health, which also shows the privilege at the heart of much volunteering in development – people volunteering from Northern countries are frequently able to be evacuated in times of crisis whilst local communities have little or no choice but to stay.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Recognise power imbalances and issues of equity between volunteers from the North and South, even when programmes are designed with care.
- Critically review the need for and value of short-term volunteering placements and whether they may start to blur with more commercial voluntourism opportunities.
- Rather than see voluntourism organisations as adversaries, explore opportunities to exchange mutual learning and good practice between the two fields.
- Consider how North-South models could be embedded within blended models of volunteering and how they connect to volunteers from the South.
- Ensure all North-South volunteering is well-designed and based on co-production with local communities and partners.
- Consider how to link up with and learn from issues-based networks and movements and why they appeal to some people more than longer-term volunteering opportunities.

C. ACKNOWLEDGING THE SOFT POWER OF VOLUNTEERING

International volunteering programmes funded wholly or partially by governments are a form of soft power. If volunteering programmes are well-designed and delivered – and if there is appropriate trust between the organisation and government, with an ability to speak truth to power and be heard – they can still be highly effective. The soft power does, however, require acknowledging. We need to better understand the motivations, roles and place of large government donors and agencies and the potential of such programmes to influence the policies and practices of other countries.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Continue to speak truth to power and invest in good relationships with government donors. This will also involve advocacy and more difficult and challenging conversations.
- Continue to advocate for progressive approaches to government-funded programmes.
- Horizon scan and undertake foresight work to understand how a change of government administration could affect investment and policy direction of volunteering programmes.

3.

Tackling wider trends

A. THE CLIMATE CRISIS

There are climate contradictions at the heart of much volunteering in development. Flying volunteers overseas, for example, generates carbon, while the notion of sending volunteers from countries that dominate global CO2 emissions to help tackle the climate-related problems of countries in the South can feel problematic to many.

Many organisations have been undertaking reviews and audits of their climate impact and are subsequently taking a more critical view as to who should travel and when. Others have moved to greater reliance on longer-term placements that involve fewer flights over a set period. Others are in the process of further strengthening their climate work, particularly in relation to marginalised communities and groups.

Addressing the climate crisis is not as simple as stopping volunteers from flying. While it would have a positive effect on carbon emissions, it would also bring an end to the people-to-people interaction and solidarity underpinning the sector, which would be an enormous loss. Furthermore, through its programming, volunteering in development has huge potential to positively address many of the worst aspects of the climate crisis.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Continue to examine opportunities to make organisational and programmatic practices and systems more sustainable. This includes critically engaging with a new, more streamlined approach to travel for both staff and volunteers whilst recognising the importance of people-to-people interaction and defending its contribution.
- Further focus on and potentially expand work seeking to tackle the climate crisis in both volunteering programming and advocacy. This should only be done when it fulfils the organisational mission and there is appropriate expertise, rather than risking mission-drift.

B. TECHNOLOGY AS AN ENABLER AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The increased use of e-volunteering during COVID shows how rapid changes in technology can allow people to participate in different ways. In many instances, this has helped diversify the body of volunteers, opening opportunities to people who were not able to travel due to disabilities or work or family commitments. Organisations are, however, often acutely aware of the digital divide and how technology and e-volunteering can exacerbate existing inequalities.

This is also a broader debate than e-volunteering alone. Wider technological changes in society have a significant – and often rapid – effect on how people get their news, engage with work and leisure, and choose to volunteer. Spending more time online and ‘doing good’ remotely, for example, may affect people’s desire to volunteer physically and whether they feel it is necessary and useful. Technological changes also continue to impact how organisations manage their data and finances or engage with stakeholders. This holds enormous potential to streamline processes and make them more efficient but also creates major risks such as data breaches and online security.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Ensure any e-volunteering programmes are developed with access in mind and an awareness of who can participate and who may be excluded. Practical issues of internet access need to be considered, whether such provision is exacerbating existing divisions in society and how people may want to get involved.
- Undertake foresight work to improve understanding of how people’s lives are affected by wider technological developments and how this could impact their decision to volunteer or engage with good causes.
- Ensure online security and data protection policies and practices are up-to-date and effective plans are in place for breaches of volunteer (and other) data.

C. SHRINKING SPACE, CONFLICT AND SECURITY

Shrinking civil society space has been an issue for many countries long before COVID emerged. Many spoken to saw it as a critical issue for their work, increasingly looking at whether it is safe and impactful for them to continue volunteering in certain locations and examining what forms of volunteering activity were appropriate. Sometimes, it also made it harder to identify partners to work with because NGOs were finding it harder to register with their governments.

In such a context, many organisations described their work with national volunteers. They often mentioned their ability to access more insecure locations to which international volunteers could not travel. While this is a practical issue of who may be able to have the greatest impact and of safeguarding, it again raises questions of power imbalances and differences in how volunteers from the North and the South may be valued.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Make space for discussion of the impact of shrinking space and insecurity in the sector and share good practice and solutions to challenges between members.
- Share insight and knowledge on rapidly changing situations in-country between members whenever possible.
- Adopt a holistic approach to consideration of shrinking space, acknowledging it is affecting, albeit in different ways, countries in the North as well as the South.

4.

Evolving approaches to volunteering programming

A. DEVELOPING A BLENDED APPROACH TO VOLUNTEERING

There was widespread recognition amongst those spoken to that they could not simply offer a single model of volunteering, recognising the diversity of people's motivations and the myriad problems addressed. Offering a blended approach was frequently seen to be a highly effective and desirable alternative.

Despite its valuable contribution during the height of the pandemic, e-volunteering, for example, was often not felt to be enormously beneficial by those spoken to and could not simply replace face-to-face volunteering. Organisations described its real potential as part of a blended model in which some face-to-face volunteering was also provided. In doing so, it could draw in a wider group of volunteers, reach new areas and extend the engagement between communities and volunteers.

Many organisations have also had considerable success offering a blend of North-South, South-South and national volunteering, drawing on the strengths of each as well as promoting the shared ownership of projects. COVID has also helped demonstrate the value of national and community volunteers, who were often able to continue work while international volunteers were repatriated (although these are clearly not new forms of volunteering).

Once again, issues of power imbalances are critical, with organisations discussing the challenge of how to engage volunteers from the South on an equal footing to those from the North, when wider structures and assumptions are frequently set up to benefit the latter.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Prioritise a blended approach to volunteering when appropriate, positioning North-South volunteering alongside and complementary to national and South-South volunteering.
- Pursue e-volunteering if it adds value to the volunteering programmes.

B. FRAMING THE VOLUNTEER'S EXPERIENCE AS A JOURNEY

Organisations frequently spoke about how they did not 'own' their volunteers and how volunteers could dip in and out of opportunities and change their form of engagement. Volunteers are often more fluid than we may expect, frequently engaging with a cause rather than an organisation. Recognising and facilitating moves between organisations, to partners and allies, but also between types of 'giving', can be highly beneficial.

Understanding a volunteer's pathway through their volunteering experience and what their journey looks like can therefore help create a better experience for the volunteer, increase the likelihood of engaging them in the longer term and help co-production with communities. Placing the volunteer's experience in its wider context and as part of a journey can boost understanding of the extent to which factors such as (un)employment, cost of living or wider life events – such as caring for children or parents – can trigger someone to start volunteering or limit involvement, and how these can change over time.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Support volunteers along a lifelong journey and seek to better understand the impact and influence of external factors, triggers, barriers and life events on their engagement.
- Examine ways to help connect and link volunteers between different organisations.
- Examine the diversity of the volunteer population and ask who is not participating and why. Understanding the resources required for someone to volunteer and wider structural barriers to taking part can help make volunteering more inclusive.

5.

Developing the evidence and knowledge base

The pause on volunteering during the pandemic meant many organisations took a step back to look at the value of their programmes. Taking stock of and critically questioning approaches was simply not possible before, when volunteers were travelling overseas.

Those spoken to mentioned gaps in knowledge, including the contribution of national volunteers; the motivations of Generation Z; the experience of host organisations; and longstanding issues not recently discussed due to the dominance of COVID, such as the impact of shrinking space and of evolving technology on international volunteering.

This is also about examining why we undertake research and the questions asked. Is, for example, research being undertaken to provide evidence for an advocacy position or to better understand the effectiveness of different models of development? Or to what extent has the historic dominance of Northern academics and Northern volunteer-sending organisations established a particular language and lens through which volunteering is viewed?

This also concerns how research is undertaken. Development research has long since advocated the importance of participatory research, which is undertaken with and not on behalf of communities. While a huge amount of good practice is evident, the voices of practitioners and communities need to be included to a greater extent.

Finally, we need to ask more about who is involved in the research. The North continues to dominate development research, and those spoken in this strategy's development wanted to see a diversification of researchers and more Southern voices and contributors.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- Facilitate opportunities for Southern voices to meaningfully participate in volunteering in development research on an equal footing. It is crucial to find ways for these researchers to collectively define the research agenda, topics researched and methods used.
- Critically ask why research is undertaken, what its purpose is and who is involved. There are also further opportunities to build engagement in participatory and peer-led research; for example, by facilitating access to capacity-building with local universities.
- Pursue research gaps on topics that have a potential impact on volunteering in development but may have traditionally been considered outside of the sector and its sphere of interest. This will involve new partnerships in different fields and academic disciplines.
- Continue to take stock and ask why members do what they do and adapt programmes and delivery accordingly. This work should take place regularly, not only during times of crisis.

Conclusion: making a new dawn for volunteering a reality

1. CO-PRODUCTION UNDERPINS EVERYTHING

For volunteering to evolve in the most useful and effective way, it needs to be done in genuine collaboration with the communities it works with. This should consider how volunteering programmes are designed and delivered but also how research is conducted. There is an enormous amount of good work already underway, but it is an evolving journey and members need to continue to challenge themselves and each other.

2. IT'S ALL ABOUT POWER

Issues of decolonisation, how organisations are organisationally structured, or how volunteers from the South are perceived and valued compared to those from the North are critical issues that affect how organisations working on volunteering in development can practically move forward. This is a process of self-interrogation and reflection for organisations in the sector, much of which will – and should – feel uncomfortable.

3. RE-VALUING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF INFORMAL AND COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERING

This may be the dominant form of volunteering globally, especially in the South, but our views of what it is, its value and how it can be facilitated tend to be viewed through a Northern lens. There is agreement that informal and community volunteering needs to be an active part of blended models of volunteering for members, but its history and unique nature also needs to be recognised and not formalised in line with dominant perspectives of what volunteering in development looks like.

4. NARROWING THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT WE SAY AND DO

Organisations recognise that addressing many of the issues discussed in this strategy require fundamentally new ways of working and thinking. There can be, however, sometimes be a gap between desires and action (i.e., between what organisations say they want to do and what they actually do). None of this is easy. Meaningful responses often pose uncomfortable and existential questions about the value and mission of some organisations, and incremental progress may be more meaningful than reactive and major changes of direction. This may remain the biggest challenge facing volunteering in development – but also its biggest opportunity. There is a genuine desire to evolve, and dialogue is a sound first step. The most important thing at this stage of the journey may be to continue these often-difficult conversations, ensure topics stay on the agenda and work together as a network to hold each other's feet to the fire.