

BRIEFING PAPER

Future Trends in Volunteering

**Exploring Synergies Across
Research From IAVE, Forum
and UN Volunteers**

A Briefing Paper for IAVE by Dr. Alice Chadwick El-Ali

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Foreword

IAVE (International Association for Volunteer Effort) believes that the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized how volunteers as agents of change provide the practical action that builds hope and resilience, improves lives, and strengthens communities. In November 2020 IAVE commissioned research to create a body of knowledge about the strategic leadership role of national volunteering leadership organizations, and to understand their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in their countries. Data was collected from across 67 countries and the research report 'Leadership for Volunteering: the COVID-19 Experience' was published in September 2021.

Shortly before IAVE commissioned their research Forum (International Forum for Volunteering in Development) commissioned research on the impact of the pandemic on volunteering for development. This research report 'COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development' was also published in 2021. In December 2021 UNV (United Nations Volunteers Programme) published the state of the world's volunteerism report, 'State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2022: Building Equal and Inclusive Societies'. It seemed important and opportune to bring these three pieces of global research on volunteering together to share knowledge, highlight and consider the strategic common issues/trends; and provide commentary on what the evidence indicates for the future of volunteering.

IAVE commissioned Dr. Alice Chadwick El-Ali to look across the three research reports and provide a briefing paper on the common issues/themes that emerge. The objective is to add value to people's understanding of global trends for volunteering and engage people in considering what the future for volunteering might or can be.

On January 25, 2022, IAVE hosted a webinar on "Let's Talk Volunteering: Exploring Future Issues and Trends" highlighting the three research reports and the global trends raised in this paper. Watch the [recording here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Alice Chadwick El-Ali recently completed her doctorate at the University of Bath (UK). Her research explored the role of volunteering within development projects in Sierra Leone and how this interacts with employment and citizenship. At a broader level she is interested in volunteering as a response to crisis, the connection between volunteering and development in policy and practice, and the role of volunteerism within the SDGs.

FUTURE TRENDS IN VOLUNTEERING

Introduction

In the last two years the COVID-19 pandemic has put enhanced focus on the volunteering space, with recognition of the key importance of volunteers in responding to both COVID-19 and the constellation of social, environmental, and economic crises occurring around the pandemic. The pandemic has accelerated existing shifts in practice and policy, including use of technology, broadening recognition of informal volunteering systems, and incorporation of community-led priorities. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted, and in some instances, exacerbated, existing challenges including unequal power relations between volunteers, communities and states, and issues of inclusion and marginalization. Alongside this, organizations are encountering resource restrictions and mobilization challenges amid increases in need. Societies around the world face the challenge of addressing and recovering from COVID-19 whilst trying to maintain progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (Global Goals).

This briefing paper presents six global trends in volunteering through the synthesis of three key pieces of research published in 2021:

- ▶ IAVE's 'Leadership for Volunteering': the COVID-19 Experience;
- ▶ Forum's COVID-19 and the Future of Volunteering for Development; and
- ▶ UN Volunteers' State of the World's Volunteerism Report 2022: Building Equal and Inclusive Societies (SWVR).

This paper highlights the synergies and alignment between these three pieces of research, setting out a common agenda for the future of volunteering. The key commonality is the importance of creating an enabling environment for volunteering. This is explored by looking at the context in which volunteering takes place and six trends representing volunteering modalities and mechanisms. Taken together these trends show how policy makers, national Volunteering Leadership Organizations (VLOs), Volunteer Involving Organizations (VIOs), International Volunteer Cooperation Organizations (IVCOs), and their networks can support and develop volunteering towards and beyond the Global Goals and the UN's Agenda 2030.

It is important to note that the three pieces of research had different aims and audiences. IAVE's research looks at the experiences of VLOs across the Global North and South, which includes advocacy, development and volunteer mobilization and how they interact with VIOs and states. The Forum report is focused on the experiences of IVCOs and the wider volunteering for development community, particularly within the context of volunteer sending and cross border volunteering. Finally, The State of the World's Volunteerism Report provides a policy framework and future positioning for volunteering in building equal and inclusive societies within the context of the Global Goals. These different aims reflect the different positions of the three organizations within the volunteering ecosystem. Whilst they have different positions all three organizations are concerned with supporting and promoting the value and importance of volunteering to support social cohesion, resilience, and inclusion.

CONTEXT IN WHICH VOLUNTEERING TAKES PLACE:

Constellation of Crises

The world is facing a constellation of crises, which are negatively impacting societies and hampering progress towards achieving the Global Goals. The impact of COVID-19 and its interaction with social, economic, and environmental challenges has led to increased urgency around creating an enabling environment for supporting volunteering. This changing context is a common theme across the three pieces of research and is important for understanding both the nature of challenges volunteering can address, as well as shifts in volunteering models and support.

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on volunteering but at the same time it has produced new social and economic challenges, which have increased areas of need and derailed national and global progress towards building safer and inclusive societies. At an organizational level, as shown by Forum and IAVE, this has led to uncertainties around the future of funding for existing models of volunteering. For Forum this concerned the model of international volunteers traveling from the Global North to the Global South. These challenges demand adaptation by organizations and volunteers. As recognized by SWVR, focusing on social innovation can both address immediate needs and contribute to the longer-term economic and social challenges wrought by the pandemic.

The climate crisis is mentioned by all three pieces of research as an area which demands the involvement of volunteers, VLOs and VIOs. The impetus to address climatic change and its social and environmental impacts has never been more pressing. Volunteers, and the organizations supporting and working with them, can innovate solutions, support adaptation and mitigation, and campaign for climate justice. Crucially, volunteering is a means of addressing the climate crisis in a more inclusive manner.

CONSTELLATION OF CRISES



Increasing inequalities is another cross-cutting contextual theme, which led to the SWVR positioning volunteering as a means of “building forward better”, through the inclusion of marginalized groups in policy, service production, and civic participation. Forum’s report identified the constellation of crises as highlighting flaws in current unequal models of development and the need for innovative new approaches. Whilst IAVE’s report highlighted how COVID-19 had shown that organizations promoting and supporting volunteering need to adapt to ongoing change and unpredictability given the constellation of crises facing communities, countries, and the world.

Global Trends

1. Broadening recognition of what volunteering is and who volunteers are

All three reports argue that there is a broader recognition of what volunteering is and who volunteers are within policy and practice. This acknowledges the definition set out at the United Nations General Assembly in 2002, that ‘volunteering refers to a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation’. COVID-19 highlighted that across North and South people volunteering within their own communities is vital for addressing challenges in an inclusive and relevant way. This understanding has brought broader recognition to informal and community-led volunteering efforts. IAVE found that during the pandemic many VLOs had shifted to providing greater support for community-based volunteers and organizations. Whilst the SWVR, argues that informal volunteering mechanisms are more relevant to countries in the Global South, and reflect a more diverse and inclusive definition of volunteering. This shift, for Forum, is an acceleration of an existing direction of travel towards recognizing and supporting community and national volunteering models to support development, reflected in a recommendation from their research that national and community-based models of volunteering be adequately supported and resourced by VIOs and governments. The SWVR report recommends that policy makers develop mechanisms for valuing, recognizing, and supporting informal volunteers to boost their impact.



POLICY POINTER

Recognize, work with and support community-led volunteering systems involving them as equal partners in the volunteering space.

2. Inclusive volunteering for social change

Inclusion is a common organizing framework for understanding how to reduce barriers to voluntary participation from marginalized groups. Inclusive participation in volunteering can lead to more inclusive programs and societies. IAVE highlights the role of VLOs in supporting the inclusion of marginalized groups, recognizing that the barriers marginalized groups face to participating in society are reflected in barriers to their participation in volunteering. Forum's research connects the inequalities in approaches to duty of care between volunteers from the Global North versus those from the Global South to broader global inequities, concerning how different volunteers are valued and supported within the volunteering for development space. The SWVR report draws attention to the gender barriers that remain in voluntary participation, with women being more likely to be involved in informal volunteering, and thereby less likely to be recognized or supported. SWVR's focus on building equal and inclusive societies shows how the inclusion of marginalized groups through volunteering can alter unequal power relations. This is achieved by showing how volunteering can contribute to governance, co-production of services and innovations driven by the priorities of volunteers' communities.



POLICY POINTER

Address barriers to volunteering faced by marginalized groups ensuring all volunteers are equally valued and supported as partners in social change.

3. Technology enabled volunteering

The spread of technology alongside the challenges created by COVID-19 has accelerated online and **technology enabled** volunteering modalities, diversifying the ways in which volunteers can come together and contribute. Lockdowns and social distancing led to an acceleration of online volunteering models. Alongside this, as recognized by IAVE, organizations supporting volunteering have quickly adopted online mechanisms for

supporting and managing volunteering. Rather than recognizing online volunteering as a specific category of volunteering, the SWVR sees it as a component of volunteering practices. This approach reflects IAVE's conclusion that virtual and face-to-face are not binary categories but reflect a blended future in which both approaches contribute in different ways at different times. Forum highlights how international volunteering programs were quickly adapted to online models at the start of the pandemic, but this has enhanced existing inequalities in digital access and infrastructure. Together, this suggests that technology can be an enabler of voluntary participation but importantly it cannot address existing inequalities within volunteering without further investment in digital access, especially for women and other marginalized groups.



POLICY POINTER

See technology as an enabler of a blended volunteering future, working to address barriers to participation and access.

4. Government engagement with volunteering

More **engagement with volunteering by governments**, is a theme across the reports, especially within the SWVR, which has state partnerships as its overarching framework. COVID-19 has led to new forms of partnerships with states around volunteering to both address the immediate needs of the pandemic and related challenges. According to SWVR, commitment to recognizing and harnessing volunteering within government-level plans of action to deliver the Global Goals is increasing. The report draws attention to the need to see volunteers as partners in producing policy and providing services, with their expertise and experiences as key aspects that need to be leveraged to achieve change. IAVE found that many VLOs had strengthened their partnerships with governments during COVID-19. Organizations have taken on a greater advocacy role drawing attention to how supporting volunteering can achieve social change and highlighting mechanisms for developing an enabling environment for volunteering to grow and flourish. Advocacy

efforts include work on national legislation, such as volunteering policies, safeguarding efforts, and integration of volunteering into development plans. Forum's perspective on working with states includes development donors, who are increasingly interested in community volunteering as a means of supporting the Global Goals.



POLICY POINTER

Engage governments as partners and advocate for policies supporting an enabling environment for volunteering.

5. Partnerships and collaboration

As well as relationships with states, COVID-19 has been the catalyst for **new partnerships and collaborations** with civil society and the private sector. IAVE's research found that a number of VLOs had strengthened strategic partnerships with corporations during the pandemic, alongside this there is a stronger imperative for cross-sector collaboration. Reduced resources, due to funding challenges, economic constraints and increasing needs, require greater collaboration to mobilize resources and create a broader coalition for change. Forum's research echoes this finding, COVID-19 triggered new cross-sectoral partnerships and relationships giving rise to new sources of finance and new programmatic models.



POLICY POINTER

Explore national and global partnerships and collaborations to leverage efforts towards supporting and promoting volunteering.

6. Coalitions for learning and shared action

Building on this momentum there is consensus that **consortiums, coalitions, and networks** are a key feature of the changing volunteering landscape. This includes leveraging pre-existing networks, such as informal volunteering mechanisms, as well as forming new coalitions for shared action. This approach involves both cooperation to deliver volunteering programs, as well as national and trans-national coalitions to advocate for creating an inclusive **enabling environment** to support volunteering. The importance of regional and global collaboration and learning amongst volunteers and the organizations supporting and working with them was highlighted across all three pieces of research.

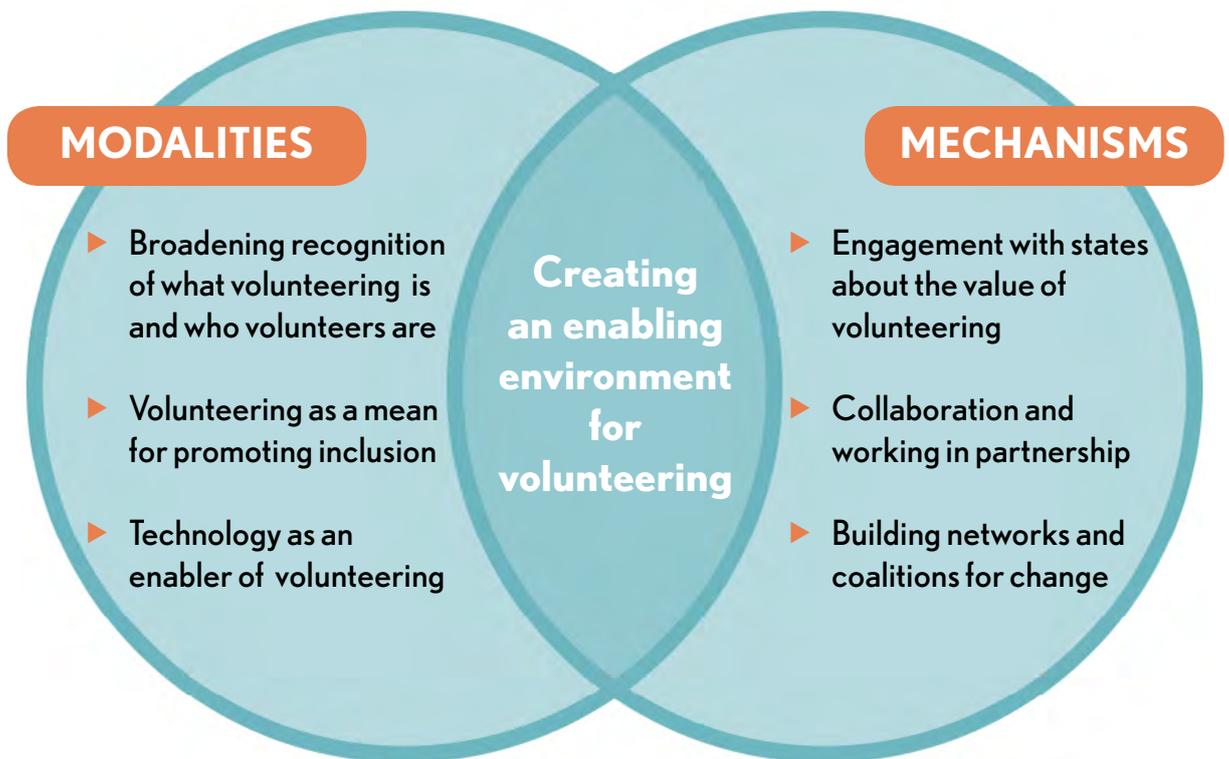


POLICY POINTER

Build coalitions and networks for learning and shared action for developing an enabling environment for volunteering.

Conclusion

This briefing paper has drawn together synergies across three key pieces of research published in 2021 concerning the future of volunteering. The constellation of crises which volunteering is both situated in and working to address includes COVID-19 response and recovery, the climate crisis and growing inequality. Six trends are highlighted representing volunteering modalities and mechanisms to support building an enabling environment for volunteering within nations and globally. To achieve this, organizations within the volunteering ecosystem need to focus on the following - broader recognition of what volunteering is and who volunteers are, volunteering as a means of promoting inclusion, technology as an enabler of volunteering, engagement with states about the value of volunteering, collaboration and working in partnership, and building networks and coalitions for change.



These six trends and their policy pointers can act as a framework for those supporting and promoting volunteering to achieve greater coherence in their efforts to enable volunteer action and deliver more inclusive and cohesive societies.



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