



To fully harness and recognise the power of volunteering for the Sustainable Development Goals, our policies, programmes and practices must be adjusted to where volunteering stands today as well as looking into the future.

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Volunteer action counts: Reimagining volunteering in the Decade of Action

This is the fourth in a series of articles featured by United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Sri Lanka in the context of International Volunteer Day 2020.

Every day, millions of individuals across the planet engage in volunteer actions supporting development initiatives in order to improve conditions for others and for themselves, their families and communities. However, the full picture of volunteering is complex and often hidden as most volunteering is spontaneous, often times it is individual actions in response to a need which are hard to capture with a tendency to focus on formal and full-time volunteers.

More than ever before, Volunteers are demonstrating the critical importance of acting together to tackle challenges of our time. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic

exacerbated some of the most persistent development challenges and has shown the critical roles of volunteers who are courageously responding and making enormous contributions in meeting the needs of vulnerable communities.

Volunteering certainly has the power to have a far bigger impact if its full potential is supported by structures, systems and partnerships that recognise its value, as often it is seen separately from development.

To fully harness and recognise the power of volunteering for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), our policies, programmes and practices must be adjusted to where volunteering stands today as well as looking into the future.

The Decade of Action must see the transition to more meaningful ownership by people the world over to ensure achievement of the SDGs. Most countries are yet to mainstream volunteering into national development plans and volunteering schemes and partnerships tend to remain isolated.

The volunteering community must strengthen positioning and the narrative of volunteering in the global discourse on the SDGs through innovative models and approaches – making the ten years to follow **the decade of action on volunteering**.

There is a need to start thinking of the next generation of policies and plans to build and include all types of volunteers – particularly those at the local level. In Sri Lanka, the Government backed by the National Policy on Volunteerism is in the process fully operationalising the National Volunteering Secretariat (NVS) which will facilitate and coordinate volunteer opportunities in the country while tracking volunteer contributions to the SDGs.

We need new, innovative and next generation models of volunteering that nurture and protect the safety, security and well-being of people who provide support and services to communities in need

There are new trends and innovations that offer significant opportunities to strengthen the impact of volunteering. Conversely, it is also important to understand the dynamics of volunteering in a world, where new innovations can both empower as well as exclude.

The **Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda** is about understanding these dynamics and reshaping the future of volunteering and global volunteering architecture to maximize impact and inclusiveness.

The Plan of Action contains three objectives to harness the full potential of volunteering: (1) strengthening people's ownership of the development agenda; (2) integrating volunteering into national and global implementation strategies and (3) measuring volunteering to contribute to a holistic understanding of the engagement of people in SDG implementation.

The volunteer actions of one billion people globally are a critical resource for working practices in the twenty-first century paving the way for social transformation. Reimagining volunteering for the SDGs requires reflecting on progress to date and envisioning how volunteering must evolve to meet new challenges over the coming decade. Those supporting volunteering have an opportunity to reimagine and position volunteers at the heart of local, national and global implementation of the development agenda.

The objectives of the Plan of Action form the foundation of reimagining volunteering and there are a number of pathways that can help to maximise the impact of volunteering. The following are important areas coming out of the **Global Synthesis Report - Plan of Action to Integrate Volunteering into the 2030 Agenda**:

- Mapping trends and evidence on volunteering for the SDGs: An important foundation for reimagining volunteering will be to understand how volunteering itself is evolving and mapping trends and evidence on the contribution of volunteering to the SDGs.
- Volunteering as SDG accelerator: Highlight distinctive characteristics of volunteering that could contribute to help solve problems that impede SDG progress becoming the accelerator.
- Next generation volunteering support: Envisioning volunteering in the 21st -century to help ensure a holistic enabling environment is created and designing forward-looking approaches.
- Measuring volunteering for the SDGs: Understanding the scale and scope of volunteering, its contributions to the SDGs and its impact is an important factor to generate evidence.

Looking ahead, we aspire to celebrate the spirit of all forms of volunteering and recognise contributions and efforts by volunteers through a reimagined volunteering to the 2030 Agenda throughout the Decade of Action.

The time has come to truly position the voluntary actions of all people, everywhere, at the heart of efforts to achieve a shared future for people and planet.

*This [article](#) was first published in *The Sunday Times Sri Lanka*. It is the fourth in a series of five articles:*

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2. [Volunteer action counts – a story from Sri Lanka](#)
3. [Social aspects of volunteering in the context of COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka](#)
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