VOLUNTEERISM AND ITS MEASUREMENTS

OVERVIEW

UN VOLUNTEERS

UNV contributes to peace and development through volunteerism worldwide. We work with partners to integrate qualified, highly motivated and well-supported UN Volunteers into development programming.

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FOREWORD

Development succeeds when people are at its centre and communities have the power to lead change. Volunteers embody this principle every day – bridging the distance between global goals and local realities.

For UNDP, volunteerism is integral to development. It forms part of the human infrastructure that sustains progress. Recognizing and measuring this contribution is essential to building societies that are inclusive, resilient and accountable.

The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report provides new insights into how volunteer action strengthens social cohesion, trust and collective problem-solving. Through the Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE), UNV proposes a foundation for integrating volunteerism into policy and programmes. Treating volunteer action as a strategic and measurable resource will allow for better investment, deeper participation and stronger inclusion.

UNDP congratulates the UNV programme on advancing this evidence-based approach. Together, we remain committed to the millions of volunteers who embody shared values that drive sustainable development.

Haoliang Xu

Acting Administrator
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Programme (UNDP)

PREFACE

Across the world, volunteers are stepping forward in quiet but determined ways. An invitation to see in villages hit by drought, in cities recovering from conflict, in communities where inequality runs deep. They listen. They organize. And they hold others up when life feels uncertain.

Yet much of what they do remains unseen. Their stories are rarely told. Their impact is seldom measured. And when it isn't seen, it isn't valued.

The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report sets out to change that and turns the spotlight on finding better ways to capture what truly counts. Not just the hours given, but the hope built, the trust restored and the lives strengthened.

The Report introduces the Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE) – a new way to understand the power of volunteering, from organized programmes to spontaneous acts of solidarity. It also draws on new research and ideas from the Global South, where communities are redefining how the value of volunteering is seen and shared.

This Report is both an insight and an invitation:

To see volunteerism not as charity, but as strength. Not as background noise, but as the rhythm that keeps communities together.

At UNV, we believe in connection – people helping people, across borders and differences, turning shared values into shared action – and commit to proving its impact with evidence.

May this report spark new ideas, open new doors and mark a new chapter – one where volunteerism is not only valued but celebrated for the impact it makes in every community.

Toily Kurbanov

Executive Coordinator
United Nations Volunteers
(UNV)

INTRODUCTION

Volunteers are stepping up as the world faces more challenges – from climate disasters to inequality. They are often the first to act, helping communities recover and rebuild. Their efforts bring people together and drive progress. Yet despite their impact, much of what volunteers do remains invisible in official data. The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report fills this gap, showing how effective volunteer measurement accelerates progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Report is launched at a critical juncture, laying the foundations for the **International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development in 2026**. It explores how measurement approaches have evolved, focusing on diverse volunteer forms and integrating voices often marginalized in measurement debates, notably from the Global South.

The **first part** of the Report (chapters 1, 2 and 3) sets the scene, reviewing why and how to measure volunteering and presenting the latest global estimates of volunteer work.

The **second part** (chapters 4, 5 and 6) looks at measuring volunteering in specific settings. It covers the individual impact of volunteering on skills and well-being and the effects on development outcomes and analyses the need for today's measurement frameworks to adapt to an era of overlapping crises. **The final part** (chapters 7 and 8) presents the **Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE).** It reveals the multidimensional impact of volunteering and offers a path to improving how data on volunteering is produced, understood and used. It also summarizes the key policy recommendations of the Report and ends with thoughts on the future of volunteer measurement.

National UN Community Volunteers support the UNDP's LoGIC project by meeting with beneficiaries in Rangamati to facilitate local climate adaptation solutions in the Chattogram Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.
Credit: UNV 2024

WHY MEASURING VOLUNTEERING MATTERS

Volunteering is critical to strengthening communities, supporting public services and advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, inconsistent measurement has fragmented the evidence base, failing to capture volunteering's diverse contributions, varied forms and holistic impact on individuals and societies. This fragmentation limits informed policy and investment decisions.

The Report argues that effective measurement is a collective responsibility, transcending the role of experts and serving as a powerful tool for learning and accountability. Measurement makes the invisible visible, empowering volunteers and communities to own their stories, celebrate contributions and influence the future. For policymakers, robust evidence provides the rationale for greater strategic investment, fostering stronger and more resilient communities.

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Chapter 1 introduces the central purpose of the Report: to present practical, inclusive and multi-method approaches to measuring volunteering. It emphasizes that while quantitative data establishes scale, **numbers alone are insufficient**. Measurement must embrace qualitative insights to capture relational dimensions such as personal growth, social connections and solidarity. A core principle is affirmed: what is not counted should still be considered to avoid undervaluing essential forms of civic action.

The chapter concludes that recognizing and leveraging the full, evidenced value of volunteering is critical for sustainable development in a rapidly changing world.

THE STATE-OF-THE-ART OF VOLUNTEER MEASUREMENT

Chapter 2 undertakes a critical review, tracing the evolution of volunteer measurement from initial statistical and economic approaches to the holistic, multi-method frameworks favoured today. Early, input-focused methods excel at showing scale and enabling comparisons. However, they do not always capture the full outcomes and impacts of volunteering or its social value across diverse societies.

The current shift integrates **qualitative and participatory approaches**, which capture less tangible effects such as trust, well-being and social capital. This multi-method development, driven by diverse actors from both the Global North and Global South, emphasizes context-specific adaptation. The chapter introduces a note of caution, however: measurement tools are never neutral

and their design fundamentally shapes what forms of volunteering are seen and valued.

It stresses that effective measurement must be purpose-led, ranging from supporting organizational efficiency to building accountability and learning. By employing mixed methods, organizations can create strategic insights that position volunteering as a powerful force for social cohesion and lasting change.

The chapter concludes by looking forward, noting that technological advances such as citizen-generated data present new opportunities. The ongoing challenge is to build robust data systems that are inclusive, context-sensitive and representative of the varied forms of volunteering, particularly informal and community-led action that is often overlooked.

Figure 1. Repertoire of measurement tools and approaches

Quantitative Methodologies

Computational Modeling
●●●●

Statistical Analysis
●●●

Return on Investiment / Cost Analyses
●●

Administrative Data Analyses
●

Digital Tracking / Citizen Science

Survey

Qualitative Methodologies

Participatory approaches
●●●●●

Outcome Harvesting
●●●●

Most Significant Change
●●●

Focus Group
●●

Participant Observation
●

Diary / Storytelling

**Interview**

GLOBAL ESTIMATES OF VOLUNTEER WORK

Chapter 3 provides the latest, harmonized estimates on the unprecedented scale of volunteer work, calculating the participation rate as the share of working-age individuals who volunteer globally and by region. These estimates are produced using the definition of volunteer work from the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS).

Drawing on improved measurement tools, the latest data findings reveal that **34.5 per cent of working-age people, or approximately 2.1 billion individuals engage in volunteer work each month globally**. Africa records the highest regional rate, with 58.5 per cent of its working-age population participating in volunteer activities.

The analysis shows that **direct volunteer work** (e.g. helping neighbours) is significantly more common globally than organization-based volunteer work, highlighting the foundational role of informal mutual aid. Estimates also indicate that volunteer work is slightly more prevalent among men globally, though this pattern varies by region, reflecting broader gendered norms in the distribution of unpaid care and civic opportunities.

The chapter concludes with a strategic road map: sustaining reliable global estimates requires countries to consistently align national surveys with the 19th ICLS definition. Systematic measurement and the formal recognition of volunteer contributions in national development plans, economic records and social policy frameworks are essential to leveraging volunteer contributions for sustainable development.

Figure 2. Total volunteer rates by region and gender (%)
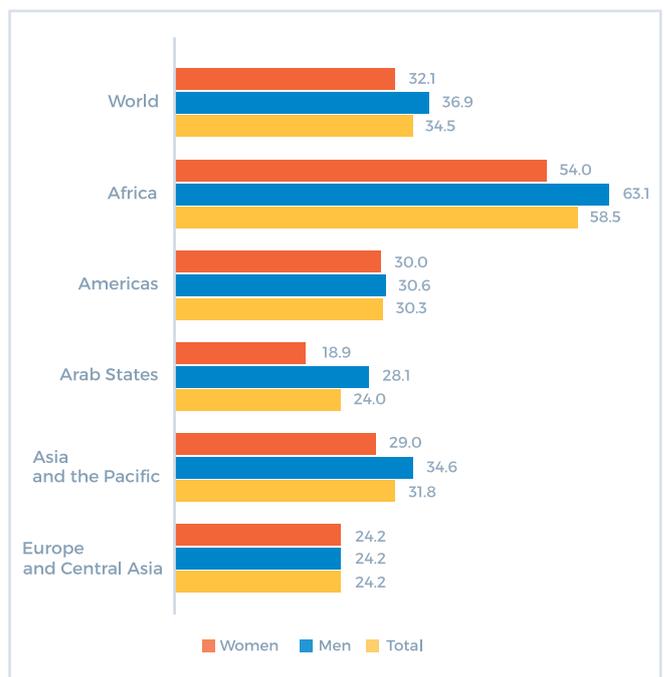
Note: Volunteer rates are expressed as the share of the working-age population in a given region that is estimated to engage in volunteer work in any given four-week period of the year, according to the definition explained earlier in this chapter.
Source: ILO calculations based on ILOSTAT, 2021 UNV-Gallup survey, 2025 UNV survey.

Chapter 4

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEERING ON INDIVIDUAL HEALTH, WELL-BEING, SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY

Chapter 4 investigates the effects of volunteering on individual human development, analysing its contributions to health, well-being, skills and employability. It stresses that volunteering is not universally beneficial; positive outcomes such as enhanced confidence and resilience can coexist with risks such as stress, exclusion and unequal access to opportunities. To capture this full spectrum of outcomes, measurement approaches must be sensitive to cultural context and inclusive of diverse individual experiences.

Current evidence, largely from the Global North, risks oversimplifying complex relationships, especially in contexts where informal volunteering dominates. This chapter advocates for mixed-methods approaches and participatory tools that couple the scale of quantitative data with the depth of qualitative insights. These methods allow volunteers to define their own indicators, revealing nuances in well-being, personal growth and the acquisition of skills that standard metrics often miss.

By generating stronger, more inclusive data, organizations and governments can design **fairer volunteer pathways**, ensuring that the profound individual benefits of volunteering – particularly for marginalized groups – are made accessible to the widest possible range of people. This requires balancing global frameworks with context-specific insights that respect local realities, identify barriers to participation and address inequalities in who volunteers, how they participate and the personal benefits they receive.

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MEASURING
THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF
VOLUNTEERING TO DEVELOPMENT

Chapter 5 investigates measurement practices across three development sectors- **economic development, health and education**. It highlights that the choice of measurement approach cannot be separated from the inequalities that shape development progress, particularly concerning gender and unequal access to opportunities. Measurement of economic value has expanded beyond monetary replacement costs to techniques such as Social Return on Investment (SROI), capturing the longer-term economic effects of improved well-being, empowerment and community cohesion. In the health and education sectors, new methods are recognizing the critical work of informal and community volunteers and their relational contributions to wider outcomes such as inclusion, retention and gender equity – aspects often neglected by purely quantitative reporting.

The chapter emphasizes that collecting and analysing disaggregated data (by gender, age, disability, etc.) is essential in order to track how volunteering addresses inequalities and to prevent programmes from inadvertently reinforcing the status quo or deepening existing disparities. The chapter concludes by calling for complementary measurement approaches that triangulate data on development outcomes with the lived experiences of volunteers and the communities they serve, ensuring that the full societal benefits of volunteering are fully recognized.

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MEASURING VOLUNTEERING DURING MULTIPLE GLOBAL CRISES

Chapter 6 addresses the complexities of measuring volunteerism within a context of multiple, interconnected global crises. Volunteers are often the first, most agile responders, playing critical, simultaneous roles in immediate relief and long-term recovery as well as sustaining social cohesion. The Report finds that traditional measurement frameworks fail because they view crises and volunteer roles in isolation, thus overlooking the interconnected nature of volunteer action.

This chapter highlights the need for integrated, adaptive and longitudinal measurement that can capture the flexibility of volunteering and how deeply it is rooted in social structures. This reveals how volunteering strengthens social networks and supports crisis dynamics, even when volunteers face acute risks themselves.

Adaptive, mixed-methods and participatory approaches – especially those co-designed with affected communities – are essential. These locally grounded strategies reveal hidden contributions, particularly from marginalized groups, track evolving roles and account for the psychosocial impact and risks that volunteers bear. This data is vital for coordinated, effective and protective crisis responses.

Ultimately, measuring volunteering in crisis goes beyond counting inputs. It provides evidence that fosters **recognition, builds solidarity** and informs **integrated and fairer responses**. By revealing how volunteer action bridges humanitarian and development efforts, measurement becomes a tool for strengthening resilience, informing crisis governance and enabling sustained collective action.

A UN Volunteer supports emergency response and early recovery in Ecuador after an earthquake. *Credit: UNV 2016*

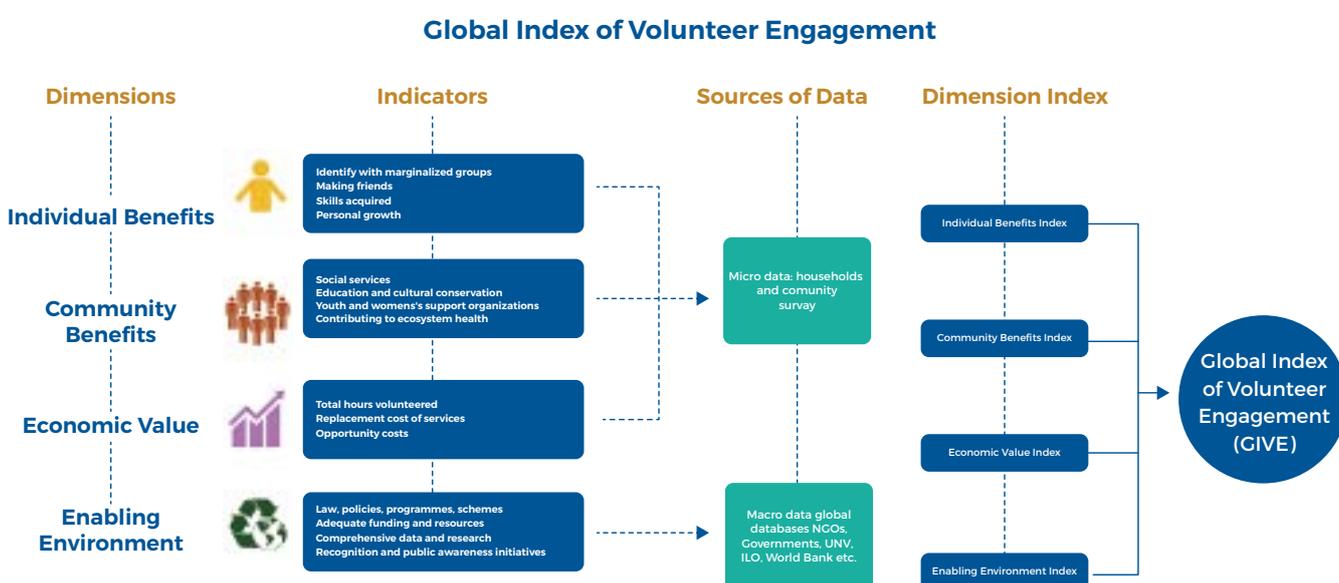# THE GLOBAL INDEX OF VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT (GIVE)

Chapter 7 introduces the Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE), a groundbreaking composite index designed to holistically measure and promote the multidimensional impact of volunteering worldwide. Its development represents a crucial step towards standardized, globally comparable data on volunteerism. The chapter elaborates on the core dimensions of the GIVE, its foundational indicators and technical methodology.

The GIVE is built on four core, equally weighted dimensions: **individual value, societal value, economic value and a strong environment that promotes and supports volunteerism.** This multidimensional approach goes beyond traditional metrics to capture the full, significant impact of volunteering. The framework can be illustrated by a virtuous cycle where an enabling environment cultivates robust volunteerism and the tangible value created then reinforces the polices and systems that support it.

This chapter acknowledges the persistent challenges of data scarcity, inconsistency and varied definitions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. The GIVE framework attempts to mitigate these issues through rigorous indicator selection and data harmonization, but stresses that for a truly holistic evaluation, it must be complemented by qualitative criteria (as explained in the preceding chapters).

The GIVE is conceived as a practical and flexible tool for action, designed to guide evidence-based policy, inform strategic investments in volunteering and encourage stronger civic participation in development. The chapter concludes with detailed recommendations for the implementation of the GIVE across key interest groups, including Member States, United Nations entities, academia, civil society, the private sector and volunteer-involving organizations.

Figure 3. The Global Index of Volunteer Engagement

Global Index of Volunteer Engagement

Dimensions	Indicators	Sources of Data	Dimension Index
Individual Benefits	Identify with marginalized groups / Making friends / Skills acquired / Personal growth	Micro data: households and comunity survay	Individual Benefits Index
Community Benefits	Social services / Education and cultural conservation / Youth and womens's support organizations / Contributing to ecosystem health		Community Benefits Index
Economic Value	Total hours volunteered / Replacement cost of services / Opportunity costs		Economic Value Index
Enabling Environment	Law, policies, programmes, schemes / Adequate funding and resources / Comprehensive data and research / Recognition and public awareness initiatives	Macro data global databases NGOs, Governments, UNV, ILO, World Bank etc.	Enabling Environment Index

Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE)

Chapter 8

MOVING FORWARD: WHAT'S NEXT FOR VOLUNTEER MEASUREMENT?

Volunteer measurement is a continuously evolving field. As the Report has demonstrated, volunteering drives cross-cutting development impacts that are often invisible. The 2026 SWVR synthesizes global debates to show how the multiple contributions of volunteering can be fully recognized, understood and mobilized for lasting change. Ultimately, measurement itself can be transformed into a dynamic tool for organizational learning, guiding decision-making and strengthening the foundations for a fairer, more resilient future.

This final chapter distils the core messages of the Report and presents a strategic road map for action. It affirms that better evidence is needed to demonstrate the value of volunteering and drive change. Measurement can motivate and empower organizations and volunteers by enabling communities to take ownership of their contributions and share their stories. It also equips decision makers with information to shape policies, laws and funding priorities. However, more accurate, consistent and systematic measurement is needed to capture the full range of contributions and impact that volunteers make, their lived experiences and the local meaning and value communities attach to volunteering.

The findings affirm that numbers alone do not tell the whole story. Capturing the scale and depth of volunteering requires diverse tools, strategies and innovations. Quantitative data can help understand levels of participation, while qualitative insights can reveal often overlooked dimensions of volunteering including personal growth, social connections, resilience and forms of solidarity. Combining different approaches from all regions of the world provides more representative understanding of volunteering worldwide. To support systematic measurement, approaches must be consistent as well as adaptive, inclusive and contextually appropriate.

Volunteer measurement serves multiple needs and requires wide involvement. Efforts to generate evidence must acknowledge and address the particular interests and priorities of actors in volunteer measurement, highlighting the need to design measurement for specific purposes and needs and balance global frameworks with locally grounded approaches. Measuring volunteering is not only a technical task for researchers or statisticians alone. Everyone who believes in the power of volunteering to support stronger, more inclusive communities should be involved.

Policy recommendations

The 2026 SWVR culminates in a set of strategic recommendations for governments, civil society and the private sector, designed to guide the next generation of volunteer measurement and practice:

Why:

Clarify the purpose and limits of volunteer measurement, ensuring findings support learning and accountability

What:

Define and consider different forms of volunteering, across projects and crises

How:

Combine measurement approaches; volunteer numbers show scale while qualitative insights add depth and meaning

Who:

Make volunteer measurement inclusive at every stage, from design to dissemination, so its results are trusted and more widely used

When:

Plan and implement measurement from the outset, maintaining consistency to capture long-term impacts of volunteering beyond project timelines

Where:

Design and conduct measurement in context-specific ways, paying particular attention to missing evidence from the Global South

Conclusion

The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report marks a turning point. It elevates volunteering from a general social good to a practical, measurable driver of global progress. The evidence confirms that measuring volunteerism is a shared responsibility, critical for recognizing contributions, building trust and strengthening communities. By adopting the tools and taking inspiration from the framework presented in this Report, particularly the Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE), stakeholders can truly value the diverse ways volunteers make a difference. Taking these steps involves moving beyond simply counting hours. It is an act of valuing people, supporting the world's 2.1 billion volunteers and empowering them to create a fairer, more peaceful and sustainable future for everyone.

The 2026 State of the World's Volunteerism Report (SWVR) presents new evidence, establishing that volunteer measurement must evolve to capture the role of volunteers in global development. Each month, an estimated 2.1 billion people volunteer – an immense resource that is often overlooked. The SWVR 2026 reveals that reliance on traditional measures, such as hours and monetary value, is not enough to justify investment or inform good policy. To address this fragmented evidence base, the Report introduces the new **Global Index of Volunteer Engagement (GIVE)**. The GIVE is a multidimensional metric built on four equal dimensions: Value to the Individual, Value to the Community, Economic Value and the Enabling Environment. It is designed to offer a unified yet adaptable assessment of the impact of volunteering.

The Report concludes that a redefinition of how contributions are valued and tracked is necessary. This is supported by the finding that measurement is a collective responsibility for all stakeholders. This shift is projected to unlock investment, strengthen policy and help mobilize human solidarity as the world builds forward. The Report offers timely insight into the crucial role accurate, systematic measurement will play. This is especially important during the **International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development in 2026.**

UN VOLUNTEERS