



## **Plan of Action**

to integrate volunteering  
into the 2030 Agenda

**A PLAN OF ACTION  
SYNTHESIS REPORT ON**

# **INTEGRATING VOLUNTEERING INTO THE 2030 AGENDA**

**IN THE UNITED NATIONS  
ECONOMIC COMMISSION  
FOR EUROPE (UNECE) REGION**

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This is a synthesis report of Member State submissions on integrating volunteerism into the 2030 Agenda in accordance with the 2015 Report of the United Nations Secretary-General (A/70/118) and General Assembly Resolution A/RES/73/140. Information synthesized in this report is based upon Member State National Situation Analyses on volunteering submitted to the Plan of Action Secretariat in 2018, contributions to the 2018 Secretary-General's report on volunteering and Voluntary National Reviews submitted by Member States as part of the process to monitor implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Europe comprises 56 UNECE Member States listed in Figure 3 on page 6. The report is an input to regional Plan of Action stakeholder consultations as requested by United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/73/140.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

**Volunteering is a powerful means to engage people to deliver the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and an environmentally sustainable, peaceful world, free of poverty, hunger and inequality where no one is left behind.<sup>1</sup>**

From providing medical care to taking climate action, from giving technical assistance to monitoring post-disaster reconstruction, an estimated one billion people volunteer globally to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>2</sup> Volunteerism is essential to ensure that global sustainable development efforts are owned by all people, implemented by all people, and for all people.

The 2030 Agenda recognizes the vital roles that volunteers everywhere are playing. Following its launch in 2015, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a Plan of Action developed by United Nations Member States through UNGA Resolutions (Figure 1) to help volunteering stakeholders enhance the recognition and integration of volunteerism into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through the concerted efforts of volunteers, governments, civil society, the private sector and the United Nations, the Plan of Action seeks to strengthen people's ownership

of the 2030 Agenda, integrate and mainstream volunteering into national strategies and policies and better measure the impact of volunteers.

Substantial progress has been made in integrating volunteerism into the SDGs and volunteers not only have a voice at the United Nations,<sup>3</sup> but often in their own countries and organizations. More than 100 countries have now measured volunteer work and over 90 countries have policies or legislation that aim to promote volunteering.<sup>4</sup> In 2018, 29 Member States recognized the efforts of volunteers in their Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) on SDG progress.

The Plan of Action will shape the future of volunteering in the context of the 2030 Agenda and a Global Technical Meeting will be held in July 2020 with the theme of 'Reimagining volunteerism for the 2030 Agenda' at the 2020 High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

**Figure 1** Key United Nations General Assembly resolutions mentioning volunteering.



In the build up to this special event, the Plan of Action Secretariat is reviewing the role of volunteerism in achieving and localizing the SDGs and creating a knowledge base that is inclusive of good practices, lessons learned and data sets using inputs from Member States, United Nations agencies, volunteer-involving organizations (VIOs), civil society organizations, academia and the private sector.

The Plan of Action aims to engage stakeholders to generate evidence and convene dialogues to strengthen and broaden this knowledge base on how volunteerism can be reimagined for the 2030 Agenda.

In 2019, five regional consultations on volunteering will take place in the context of the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development, providing space for Plan of Action stakeholders to discuss evidence and approaches, share best practices and identify opportunities for addressing knowledge gaps. Further civil society-led consultations are envisaged in the second half of 2019 and will be supplemented by online consultations and conversations. Together,

these dialogues, analyses and best practices will inform a global synthesis report for the 2020 Global Technical Meeting<sup>i</sup> (Figure 2).

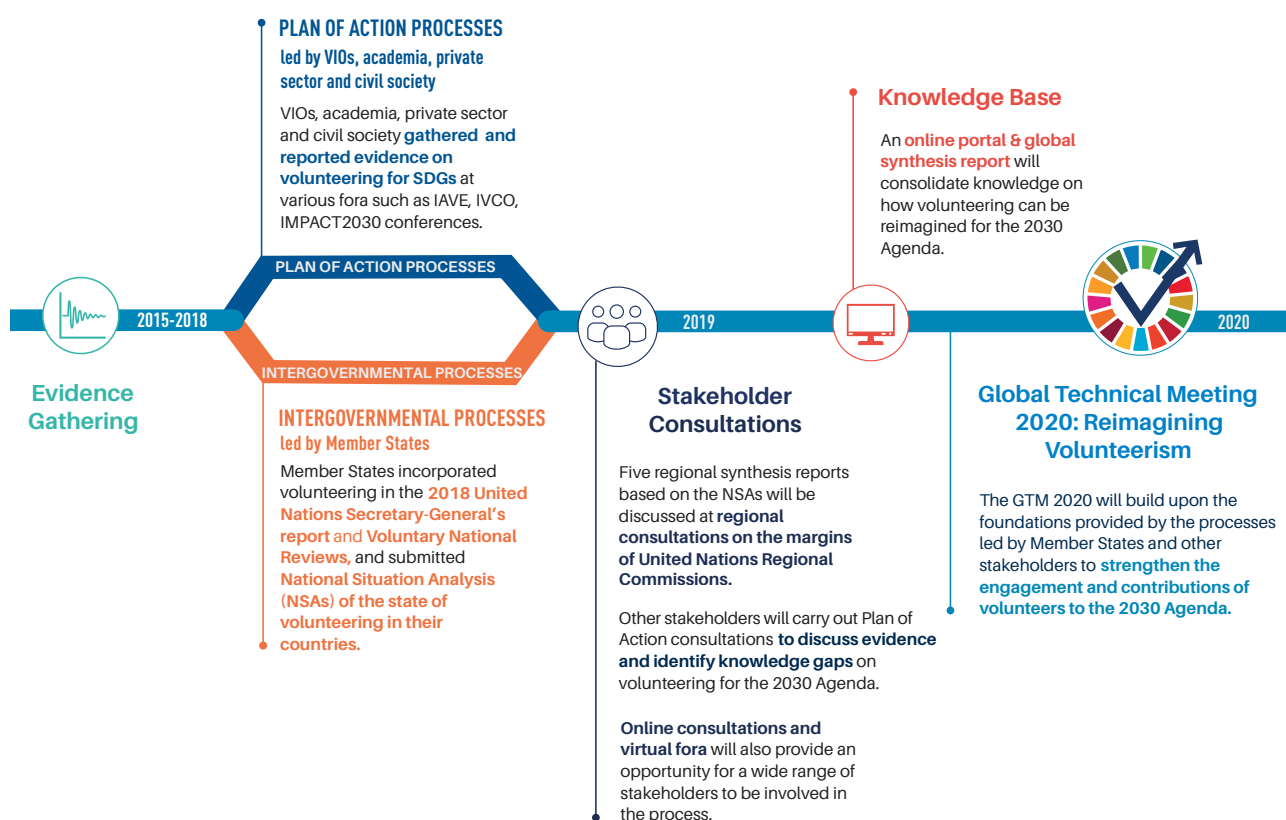
This regional synthesis report is a Plan of Action input to the regional consultation on volunteerism held as part of the 2019 Regional Forum on Sustainable Development convened by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE).

It draws on information from three sources (refer to Annex A for details). Firstly, it uses information from National Situation Analyses (NSAs) on volunteerism that were developed in consultation with the United Nations, civil society and VIOs to generate evidence and data on the scale, scope and impact of volunteerism for the Plan of Action<sup>ii</sup>.

i As requested by United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/129, the United Nations Volunteers programme and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies will chair a Global Technical Meeting at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development in July 2020, with Member States and other stakeholders.

ii In line with the 2015 Report of the United Nations Secretary-General (A/70/118), United Nations Member States were called upon to contribute a National Situation Analysis on volunteerism in 2018 as part of the implementation of the Plan of Action and to submit these to the United Nations Volunteers programme.

**Figure 2** Plan of Action process: Road to 2020 “Reimagining Volunteerism”.



Secondly, it uses information on volunteering that was reported by Member States in their 2018 VNRs on progress towards the 2030 Agenda. Finally, evidence from recent reports was used, including the 2018 Secretary-General's report on volunteering; global, regional and national level data from Member States and regional bodies; and key reports from United Nations agencies and programmes.

This report consists of four chapters. Chapter 2 gives an overview of regional progress made towards the 2030 Agenda to help identify trends and opportunities where volunteerism could help

strengthen and accelerate SDG progress. Chapter 3 looks at existing progress on integrating volunteerism into the 2030 Agenda. Chapter 4 brings together the information in Chapters 2 and 3 to provide initial recommendations on actions that volunteering actors in the UNECE region can take to achieve the goals of the Plan of Action. These initial recommendations are not exhaustive and will be used as input into further dialogues and consultations on the Plan of Action at the Regional Forums on Sustainable Development and in the lead up to the 2020 Global Technical Meeting.

## 2. THE 2030 AGENDA IN THE UNECE REGION

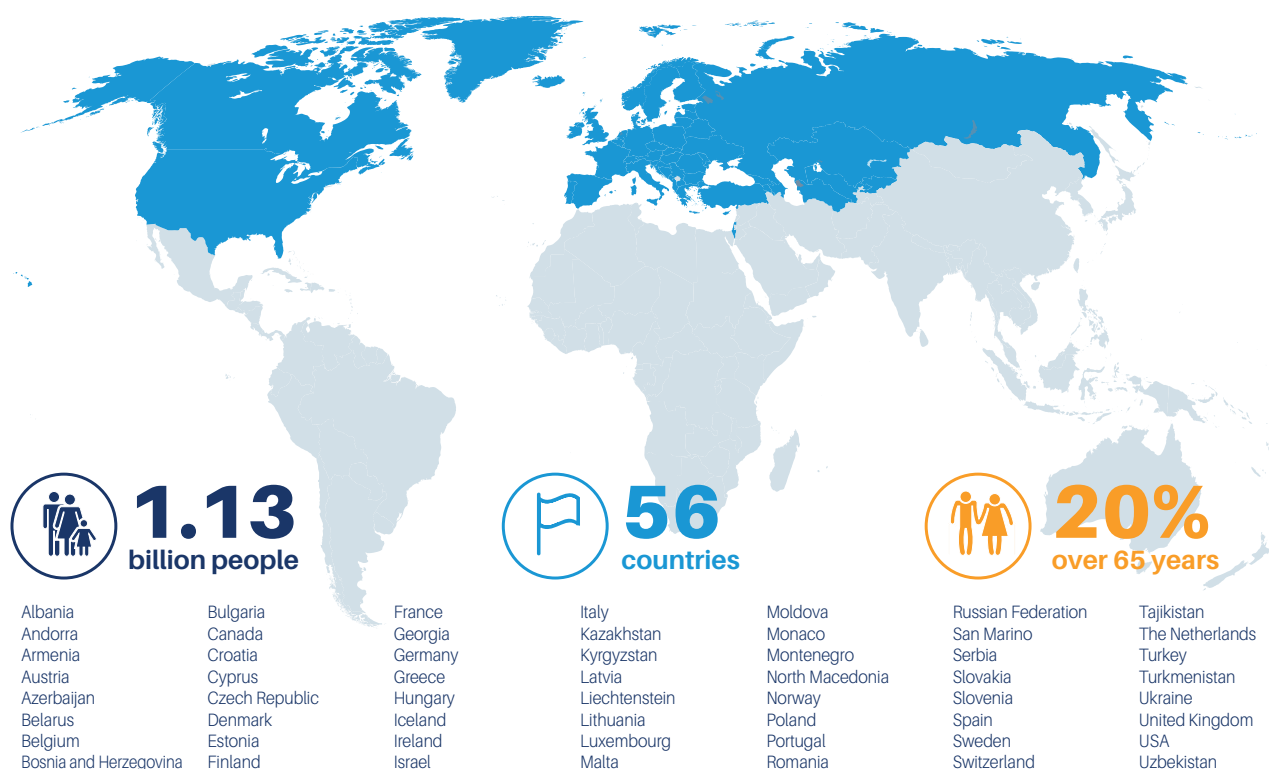
A broad uptake of the 2030 Agenda has occurred across the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe region. Between 2015 and 2018, a total of 36 UNECE Member States reported on SDG progress in their VNRs.<sup>5</sup>

Some Member States produced their own SDG progress reports and monitoring platforms, such as Poland which is creating a national reporting platform<sup>6</sup> and Armenia which launched a real-time platform in 2017 to measure and visualize SDG progress.<sup>7</sup> Sub-regional actors, such as the European Union<sup>8</sup> and Eurasian Economic Union,<sup>9</sup> have also published their own progress reports. Many UNECE Member States have aligned policies with the SDGs and created bodies to coordinate

efforts. For example, in 2018 Kazakhstan established a nationally-owned SDG coordination architecture<sup>10</sup> and Canada established an SDG coordination and monitoring platform.<sup>11</sup>

Progress on achieving the SDGs across the region is mixed. The large variations in data collection, with notable absences of accurate and disaggregated data for some countries and sub-regions, means that it is difficult to obtain an accurate picture.

**Figure 3** Map of the UNECE region.



Many countries have been making progress in eliminating poverty (SDG 1), promoting good health and well-being (SDG 3) and providing quality education (SDG 4), although there are some important caveats. For example, while extreme poverty rates are low in many UNECE countries, significant numbers of people remain affected by multidimensional poverty,<sup>12</sup> while countries in the UNECE region with the lowest GDP per capita have poverty rates of over 30 percent.<sup>13</sup>

**Some key thematic areas arise when considering how volunteerism can assist in accelerating SDG progress across the region. These include inequality, demographic changes, migration, youth unemployment and climate change.**

Inequality cuts across SDG progress. In countries such as Bulgaria, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and the United Kingdom the income gap between rich and poor has widened.<sup>14</sup> Between sub-regions, countries and even within very localized contexts inequalities and marginalization related to socio-economic status, ethnicity or gender significantly impact human development. Some progress has been made. For example, in the European Union gender pay gaps have decreased in countries such as Belgium, Hungary and Spain,<sup>15</sup> but across the UNECE region economic empowerment opportunities for women remain constrained by unpaid care responsibilities and lack of available support.<sup>16</sup>

**Demographic changes in the UNECE region present significant challenges and opportunities to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda, especially as it relates to volunteerism.**

The population is generally aging and by 2030 more than 20 percent of the total population is expected to be at least 65 years old, with five percent aged 80 years old and above.<sup>17</sup> With more people living longer, greater stresses will be placed on existing support systems, while new opportunities will emerge to engage healthier, older demographics. The region is also subject to substantial flows of asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants. There are flows of migrants within the region, for example from Eastern and Southern Europe to Western Europe and from

Latin America to North America,<sup>18</sup> as well as flows of displaced people from outside of the region, such as those fleeing the Syrian conflict. With the adoption of the United Nations Global Compact on Migration in 2018, new momentum has been gained to harness the positive potential of migration.<sup>19</sup>

Another key SDG challenge that volunteers can help to meet is achieving decent work for all. **While unemployment has declined in most countries in the region, youth access to full and fair employment remains a concern.**<sup>20</sup> In the USA, youth unemployment reached 8.6 percent in 2018,<sup>21</sup> in European Union countries in 2017 the average youth unemployment rate was 16.9 percent (ranging from 6.8 percent in Germany to 43.6 percent in Greece),<sup>22</sup> while for seven out of nine countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States region the youth unemployment rate was more than double that of people over the age of 24.<sup>23</sup> Many young people who do find work are unable to find a full-time or fairly paid job, with engagement in part-time or 'gig economy' jobs increasingly prevalent, impacting the financial security and human capital development of the region's youth. In addition, young women are less likely to be in employment, education or training in many countries, leading to unequal labour market outcomes between men and women.<sup>24</sup>

Climate change will potentially impact the achievement of all SDG targets in the region and volunteers will need to be an integral part of adaptation and mitigation efforts. **Progress against the environmental and climate-focused SDGs is mixed and varies within countries and across indicators.**<sup>25</sup> For example, in the European Union energy efficiency and access to clean energy has improved in countries such as the Czech Republic, France and Germany,<sup>26</sup> but European Union greenhouse gas emissions actually increased by 0.6 percent in 2017 largely because of road transport and increased energy consumption.<sup>27</sup> While the region includes some of the biggest contributors to man-made global warming, it also possesses many important solutions, such as progressive green energy innovations and climate change mitigation and adaption policies.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. KEY TRENDS IN VOLUNTEERING IN THE UNECE REGION

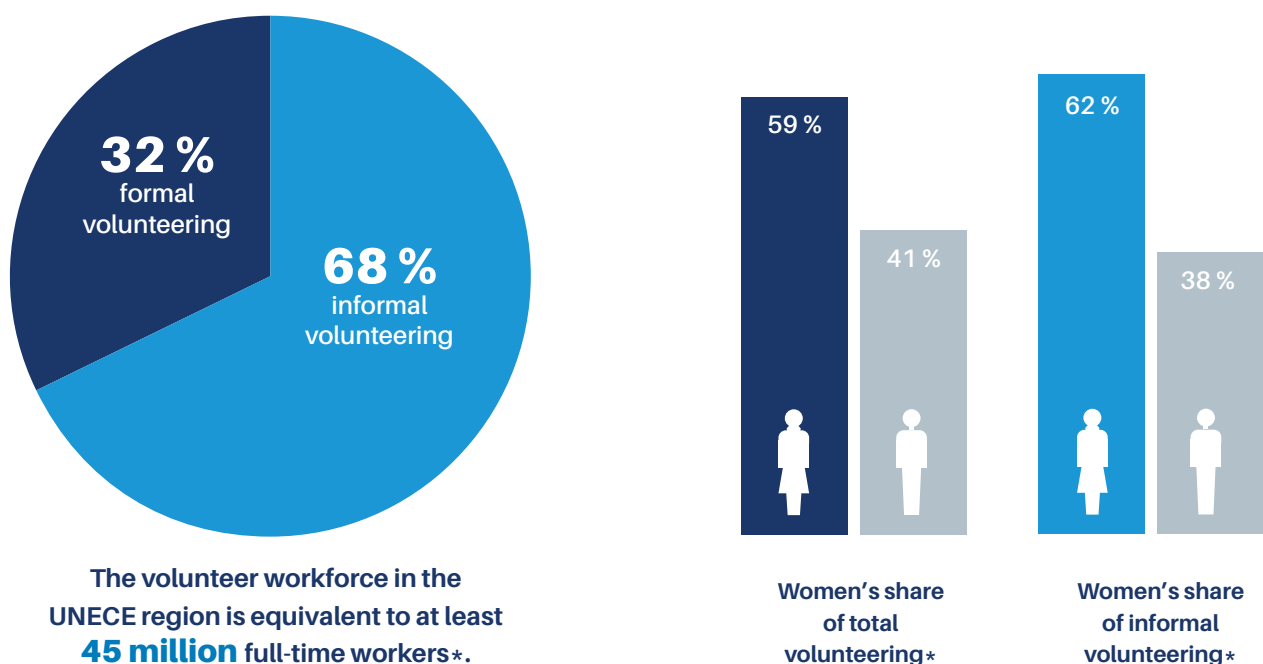
According to the recent estimates in the 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report, the combined efforts of volunteers in the UNECE region would be equivalent to at least 45 million full-time workers. An estimated 32 percent of these are formal volunteers, with the majority (68 percent) volunteering informally.<sup>29</sup>

Women carry out the majority of volunteer work, at around 59 percent of the total, and this rises to 62 percent for informal volunteers. While estimates of the scale and scope of volunteering in the region are useful, it is difficult to summarize regional trends due to variable quality and coverage of the data and because across the UNECE region volunteering is defined, understood and experienced in different ways according to social, economic and political norms.

Both the way that volunteering is perceived and the way that it is done continues to change. In

many countries, formal volunteering continues to become more irregular as it is influenced by factors that include new technologies and changes to employment. Volunteering is increasingly seen by policymakers as a means to constructively engage unemployed and under-employed youth and many NSA's reported an emphasis on enhancing employability, such as in Malta where a Youth Voluntary Work Scheme aims to improve skills and employment prospects.<sup>30</sup> A further trend is an emphasis to engage older people through volunteering.

**Figure 4** Scale and scope of volunteering in the UNECE region.



\*Estimates derived from data from the 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report.



In Austria for example, the most active age group of volunteers is people aged 50-69, with 55 percent of this age group engaging in volunteer activities.<sup>31</sup> While countries in the region continue to adopt policies and legislation around volunteering, there is a growing recognition that more bottom-up and locally-informed approaches to supporting volunteerism are needed.<sup>32</sup> The range of actors directly involved with volunteering is also broadening with, for example, the private sector playing a more active role as businesses value volunteering as a means to achieve increasingly important Corporate Social Responsibility goals.

### 3.1. STRENGTHENING PEOPLE'S OWNERSHIP OF THE SDGs

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes a people-centered and locally-owned approach to development and recognizes that the SDGs can only be achieved through the engagement of all stakeholders. **Volunteering can play a pivotal role in strengthening local ownership through engaging a wide of range of people, promoting solidarity and connecting global and local initiatives.**<sup>33</sup> According to the data reviewed for this report, volunteers across the UNECE region are strengthening people's ownership of the 2030 Agenda through some key actions.

### IMPLEMENTING A PEOPLE-CENTERED APPROACH TO THE SDGs

Volunteers have been providing basic social services (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4) to ensure that all individuals attain a minimum standard of living and live a life of dignity. This work has become more prevalent following the economic downturns after the 2007-2008 financial crisis. For example, through the European Federation of Food Banks, 16,400 volunteers worked at 326 foodbanks in 23 European countries in 2016 to reduce food insecurity and redistribute food discarded by supermarkets to socially or economically disadvantaged people.<sup>34</sup> In Kazakhstan, health for all is promoted through doctors of the National Research Cardiac Surgery Center who volunteer to treat patients for free that are in severe need of surgical interventions.<sup>35</sup> Volunteering also enables people across the region to develop skills and knowledge that help them find employment and decent work (SDG 8). For example, in France an 'International Business Volunteer Year' and 'International Administration Volunteer Year' enable youth to enhance their employment prospects by volunteering abroad.<sup>36</sup> Volunteers also continue to play significant roles in environmental protection and climate change adaption and mitigation (SDGs 6, 7, 13, 14 and 15), building on a long history of environmental conservation volunteering and catalyzed by growing awareness of serious environmental challenges. For example, in the United Kingdom an estimated 300,000 volunteers work in conservation projects,<sup>37</sup> while in Azerbaijan volunteers work to reduce waste by collecting and recycling paper.<sup>38</sup>

### HARNESSING THE POWER OF YOUTH TO MAKE POSITIVE CHANGE<sup>48</sup>

The #iwill campaign in the United Kingdom encourages 10- to 20-year-olds to volunteer and calls for business, education, public and voluntary organizations to recognize that young people can make a positive difference. The campaign has a special focus on youth from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and relies on funding from government, the national lottery and other stakeholders. Since 2016, 875 organizations have participated in the campaign to organize youth volunteering in areas that include health and women's empowerment.

Source: NCVO 2018; [www.iwill.org.uk](http://www.iwill.org.uk).

## MOBILIZING PEOPLE TO ACT

Across the UNECE region, campaigns raise awareness of how people can volunteer to make a difference to meet sustainable development challenges. For example, the Government of Spain publishes guidance informing citizens on how they can contribute to the 2030 Agenda through volunteering<sup>39</sup> and in Kazakhstan a national awareness-raising project called Generous Heart encourages citizens, business and civil society organizations to participate in volunteering.<sup>40</sup> In Cyprus, Malta and Poland, volunteering has been integrated into school curricula to promote social inclusion and employment skills.<sup>41</sup> Volunteers also raise their own awareness through volunteering itself, such as in Armenia where the Armenian Red Cross Society and the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees train young volunteers on gender-based violence,<sup>42</sup> and in Malta where a volunteering campaign raised awareness of global issues, such as climate change and gender equality.<sup>43</sup>

Governments can foster volunteer engagement by recognizing and valuing volunteerism as a social behaviour, including through 'traditional' awards and an increasing trend of certification integrated with the job market. The Government of Austria issues 'volunteer passports' that document skills acquired during volunteering to help volunteers apply for jobs.<sup>44</sup> In Croatia, the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth certifies skills gained through volunteering in

a scheme that is now recognized by 23 employers.<sup>45</sup> In France, an increasing number of universities allow students to obtain credits through volunteering that can also be transferred within Europe through the European Credit Transfer System.<sup>46</sup> Campaigns and awards, such as International Volunteers Day on 5 December, also help to raise public awareness. For example in the Russian Federation, 2018 was declared the 'Year of the Volunteer' which led to an increased public recognition of volunteering and the creation of 178 volunteer centers.<sup>47</sup>

## EMPOWERING THE MOST MARGINALIZED

Volunteerism is helping to contribute to the key 2030 Agenda principles of ensuring that "no one is left behind" and to "reach the furthest behind first."<sup>49</sup> **Volunteers can extend support to the most vulnerable, while engaging in volunteering can empower marginalized people to own the solutions to the challenges they face.**<sup>50</sup> With its aging population, elderly people in the UNECE can particularly benefit from volunteering. In Azerbaijan, the Volunteering Has No Age project empowers elderly people living in social care facilities to volunteer to supervise children.<sup>51</sup> In Israel, volunteers provide information through a telephone hotline to senior citizens on issues such as health and pensions, while in Belarus corporate volunteers increase the digital literacy of older generations.<sup>52</sup> In the United Kingdom, a pilot initiative aims to overcome the social isolation of older people and people living with

## VOLUNTEERING FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION AND QUALITY EDUCATION<sup>58</sup>

In British Columbia, Canada, an initiative by the Department for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship partners with public libraries to support the integration of recently arrived migrants. The NewToBC initiative implements the Library Champions Project which provides migrants with the opportunity to become a volunteer to help other migrants discover libraries and their communities. More than 1,200 migrants have been trained as volunteers through the initiative, who in turn have reached out to more than 74,300 other newly arrived migrants. The initiative contributes to SDGs 4 and 9 through volunteering, by supporting culturally diverse, inclusive and welcoming communities in British Columbia, as well as granting access to quality education.

Source: Government of Canada 2018; <https://newtobc.ca>.

disabilities by engaging volunteers to organize social events and home visits.<sup>53</sup>

Across the UNECE region, stakeholders increasingly acknowledge the potential for volunteering to empower women and promote gender equality, for example the European Voluntary Service works to promote women's rights both within and outside the European Union region.<sup>54</sup>

Across the region volunteers are primary actors in humanitarian responses and make invaluable contributions to support, integrate and harness the potential of migrants and displaced people. Both host communities, as well as migrants and displaced people, are assisting in these efforts. In Germany, volunteer-led initiatives have met the immediate needs of refugees and asylum seekers, including through the provision of shelter and healthcare,<sup>55</sup> while in Austria<sup>56</sup> and Greece<sup>57</sup> asylum seekers have provided support to new arrivals through volunteering. As with the Library Champions project in Canada (see box), volunteering is also playing an important role in integrating migrants through connecting people, often with very different backgrounds, to create bonds of trust and understanding between groups and communities.

## 3.2. INTEGRATING VOLUNTEERS INTO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2030 AGENDA

As a cross-cutting development modality, the full potential of volunteerism cannot be realized unless it is mainstreamed across the different policy areas of the 2030 Agenda. Drawing on the available data, a clearer picture is emerging on how countries across the UNECE region have been integrating volunteerism into national and international efforts to achieve the SDGs.

### MAINSTREAMING VOLUNTEERING THROUGH LEGISLATION AND POLICY

Countries in the region continue to adopt policies and legislation to give volunteers stronger protection and incentives to volunteer. According to UNV estimates, at least 37 UNECE Member States have introduced policies, legislation or other measures specific or relevant to volunteering.

Seven countries reported having national volunteering legislation in their NSAs. Examples include the 2007 Croatian Law on Volunteering which defines basic volunteering principles, such as non-discrimination, mobility, free will and solidarity<sup>60</sup> and the 2007 Act on Volunteer Service in the Czech Republic which aims to protect the safety and well-being of volunteers.<sup>61</sup> In the UNECE region, volunteerism thrives in countries with a less regulated and more decentralized environment. In the Netherlands, the task of supporting and promoting volunteerism has been transferred to municipalities through legislation, such as The Social Support Act, which gives municipalities the scope to create policy and give tax incentives to VIOs.<sup>62</sup>

In the United Kingdom, no specific law for volunteers exists and although this is acknowledged as having some benefits, a disadvantage is that volunteers lack legal protection through employment and anti-discrimination laws.<sup>63</sup>

**Mainstreaming volunteering into development policies can allow volunteers to contribute to all SDGs while receiving a broad range of support.**

Across the UNECE region some countries have developed policies specific to volunteering to help with mainstreaming and coherence across policy fields.

A good example comes from Ireland which in 2019 is developing a National Volunteering Strategy through consultations and surveys of multiple stakeholders.<sup>64</sup> In many UNECE countries, volunteering is mainstreamed in national youth policies, including in Croatia, Denmark, Hungary, Poland and Turkmenistan.<sup>65</sup> This is also the case for the sub-regional level, for example a 2018 European Union strategy for young people who are not in employment, education or training promotes volunteerism as a means of connecting youth, building solidarity and enhancing employability.<sup>66</sup> However, while volunteering is already well integrated into many youth policies it is not often mainstreamed into other policy areas. An exception to this trend comes from Malta where the National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing (2014-2020) aims to foster volunteering among older people through national programmes and an online platform.<sup>67</sup>

## INNOVATION, INVESTMENT AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Formalizing volunteering through the creation of innovative initiatives and schemes can provide volunteers with stronger support. Across the region many national schemes provide young people with opportunities to gain skills and experience while contributing to sustainable development efforts, such as those in Austria, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Lithuania.<sup>68</sup> However, while schemes are common, they are not always well integrated into wider national and international development strategies, as for example in the United Kingdom where the National Citizen Service volunteering is embedded in the national Civil Society Strategy<sup>69</sup> or in Azerbaijan where the ASAN Volunteers initiative is integrated into Azerbaijan's national youth strategy to increase the employability of youth.<sup>70</sup> Schemes require sustained funding and all ten of the countries providing NSAs described funding commitments to volunteering, showing that while volunteering may be a cost-effective approach to sustainable development, it is not free of cost. For example, the Government of France allocates Euro 17 million annually to support volunteerism, in Georgia a Youth Development Fund provides financial support for volunteering by marginalized groups,<sup>71</sup> while in Austria a Recognition

### INTEGRATION OF VOLUNTEERISM INTO NATIONAL LEGISLATION AND POLICIES IN AZERBAIJAN

In 2009 in Azerbaijan, a law on voluntary activities (*"Könüllü fəaliyyət haqqında," Azərbaycan Respublikasının Qanunu* No. 828-III) was adopted defining the rights and obligations of volunteers and VIOs. It defines rules to protect volunteers, including the necessity of a contract, provision of insurance and compensation for expenses. Following the 2009 law, in 2013 the Ministry of Youth and Sport of Azerbaijan published a guidebook on volunteering and introduced the Azerbaijan Voluntary Service, through which around 2,400 people have volunteered. In 2015, volunteering was integrated into the Development Strategy of Azerbaijani Youth 2015-2025 and today Azerbaijan operates a number of volunteer programmes, such as Azerbaijan Service and Assessment Network (ASAN) Volunteers which since 2013 has involved more than 15,000 youth in projects focusing on social inclusion and environment protection.

*Source: Government of Azerbaijan, 2018.*

Fund for Volunteer Commitment subsidizes the efforts of VIOs with up to Euro 15,000.<sup>72</sup>

Technology helps connect people with volunteering opportunities and enhances volunteer-led development outcomes. Technological platforms are used across the UNECE region to mobilize and coordinate volunteers. For example, the Volunteer of Russia online information system has over 350,000 registered volunteers, web portals in Austria, Azerbaijan and Wales connect young people with VIOs,<sup>73</sup> while the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' Virtual Volunteer mobile application connects local volunteers with migrants.<sup>74</sup> Technology is also used by volunteers to enhance their work. In the USA, volunteers use mobile monitoring devices to measure and map air and water pollution<sup>75</sup> and online volunteers digitally map humanitarian relief efforts to support the work of the Netherlands Red Cross.<sup>76</sup> Across the region since 2002 more than 40,000 people have been mobilized as United Nations Online Volunteers to support sustainable development efforts, including through editing, translating and design.<sup>77</sup>

## MAINSTREAMING VOLUNTEERING INTO INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The UNECE region has an established tradition of deploying volunteers with technical skills to support developing countries. The region continues

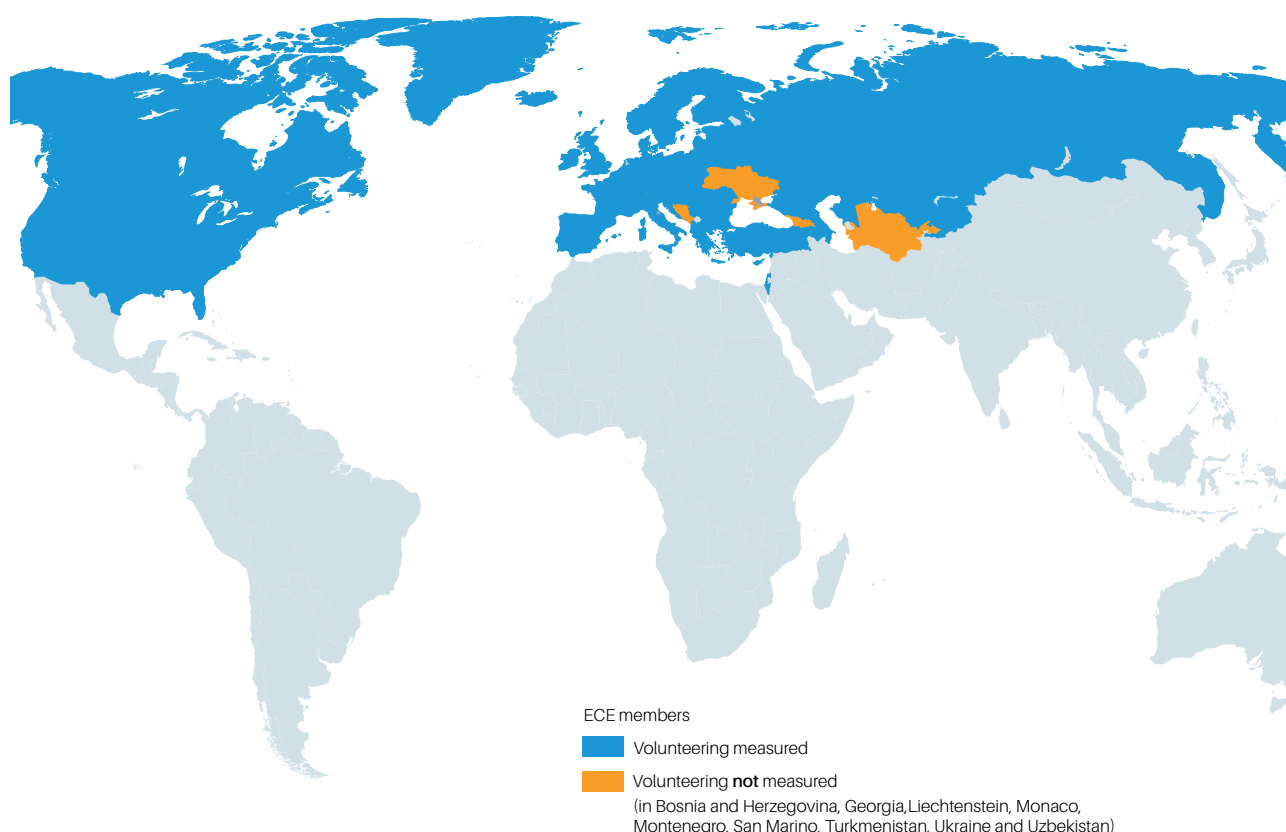
to send the greatest number of international volunteers through schemes, such as the United States Peace Corps Volunteer programme and France Volontaires. In the European Union region, national schemes have been complemented by trans-national cooperation initiatives, such as the European Voluntary Service which allows European Union citizens to volunteer with civil society organizations in another Member State or outside the European Union region.<sup>78</sup> International volunteering in the UNECE region is changing as volunteer-sending organizations reassess their modalities and partnerships to ensure that their volunteers are adding value based on local needs. Across most international schemes a greater emphasis is being placed on working with local communities and promoting South-South and South-North exchange. Some international VIOs from the UNECE region have even pioneered new South-South, triangular and even North-South deployments. For example, the Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation has focused its efforts on promoting reciprocal exchange of volunteers between organizations in Norway and developing countries.<sup>79</sup> Alongside new modalities, there are multiple examples of newly established international volunteering schemes, including in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine.<sup>80</sup>

### VOLUNTARY OPPORTUNITIES FOR GERMAN YOUTH

Germany has introduced a number of state-funded national volunteering initiatives following the introduction of the Act to Promote Youth Voluntary Services in 2008. They include the Voluntary Social Year (*Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr*) and the Voluntary Ecological Year (*Freiwilliges Ökologisches Jahr*) which support German citizens to volunteer for a year by providing a living allowance and insurance coverage. In addition, the International Youth Voluntary Service allows German youth to volunteer abroad, while giving young people from partner countries the opportunity to volunteer in Germany. In 2017, a total of 104,651 volunteers participated in both the national and international volunteer programmes.

*Source: Government of Germany, 2018.*

Figure 5 Geographical distribution of UNECE countries by experience in measuring volunteer work, 2008-2017.



### 3.3. MEASURING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF VOLUNTEERS

Although volunteering is increasingly recognized as an important cross-cutting tool for achieving the SDGs, it is rarely measured. This is often due to a lack of recognition and because the reliable and regular use of statistical tools to measure volunteering is beyond the resources of many countries.

**Measurement is important to demonstrate impact, monitor contributions to the SDGs and ultimately make the case for increased investments of time and money in volunteering.**<sup>81</sup> Measurement also plays an important role in monitoring the overall progress towards the 2030 Agenda with disaggregated measurement particularly important to ensure that sustainable development efforts are inclusive and leave no one behind.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the shortfalls in measuring volunteering contributions, efforts are improving. The ILO *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work* (2011) provides a model that some countries have taken as the basis for the development of national surveys.<sup>83</sup> And, in 2013, the International Conference of Labour Statisticians recognized and defined volunteer work, allowing for comparable and regular collection of data on volunteering as part of established labour force measurement. Globally, the UNECE region has made the greatest concerted efforts to measure volunteering, including through values surveys, household surveys and time use surveys.

The ILO estimates that between 2007 and 2017, 103 United Nations Member States collected data on volunteering and around half were from the UNECE region. In the UNECE region, 84 percent of countries (47 out of 56) have recently collected data on



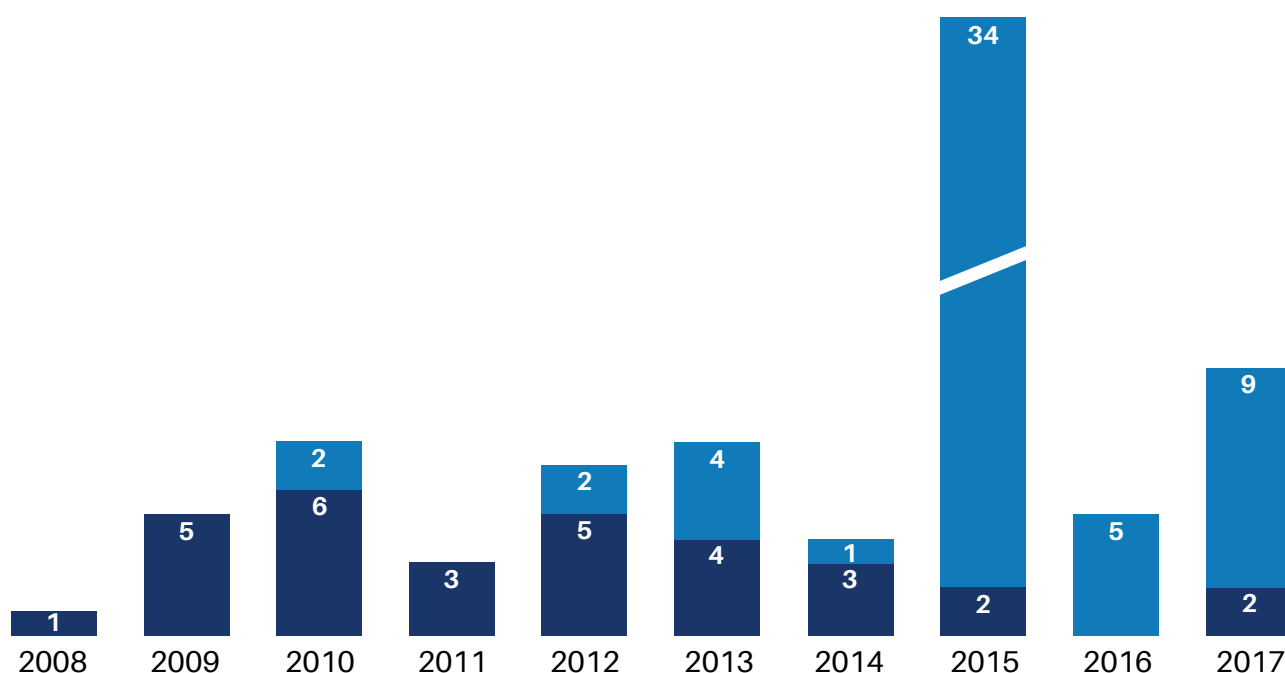
volunteering, all of which deployed dedicated survey modules focused on volunteering.<sup>84</sup>

Based on ILO estimates, recent data on volunteer work covers approximately 93 percent of the UNECE population. Most of it is focused on the number of volunteers, the time spent volunteering and the type of volunteering tasks performed.<sup>85</sup> The most consistent measurement takes place in the European Union where in 2011 the European Union conducted a dedicated survey on volunteering<sup>86</sup> and in 2015 the European Union Survey on Income and Living Conditions was used to estimate engagement in volunteer work of the European Union population aged 16 years and over. In addition, standalone dedicated surveys to measure volunteerism were conducted by Canada, Germany, Ireland, Moldova and Portugal. In Ireland and Moldova, measurements were made using dedicated modules attached to labour force surveys, while surveys on social participation and social giving (including

volunteering) were conducted in Canada and the United Kingdom.<sup>87</sup>

Six out of the 10 countries submitting NSAs outlined their methodologies to measure volunteerism.<sup>88</sup> For example in Cyprus, the National Statistical Office estimated that 7.17 percent of the population participated in volunteer work through an organization, 2.63 percent participated in volunteer work on their own and 1.79 percent participated in a public consultation.<sup>89</sup> In Germany, a study funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth showed that 43.6 percent of the population above the age of 14 volunteered in 2014.<sup>90</sup> In addition to measuring the scale and scope of volunteering, measuring the economic value of volunteering highlights the enormous in-kind contributions made by volunteers. In the UNECE region a few countries, such as Norway, regularly publish statistics showing the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contributions of volunteers.<sup>91</sup> For example, the total economic value of volunteer work

**Figure 6** Number of measurements of volunteer work in the UNECE region, by type of data source, 2008-2017.



Number of measurements

Time Use Survey (TUS)

Other sources (Labour Force Surveys, GSS, LFS, EU SILC and other modules)

in Poland was estimated at representing 2.8 percent of GDP, equal to 9.6 percent of people working in the national economy,<sup>92</sup> while volunteers in the Czech Republic provided over 45 million hours of service in 2015, which equaled an economic value of CZK 5.9 billion (US\$ 260 million).<sup>93</sup>

A total of more than 90 measurements were made in the UNECE region during the 2008-2017 period. Traditionally, time use surveys have been the main data sources on volunteering due to their capacity to capture the irregular nature of volunteering. However, in recent years collecting data through modules attached to different surveys has become a more common practice. This change in approach may have been influenced by the results of the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians

which established the international statistical definition of volunteer work. Between 2008-2017 an estimated 47 percent of UNECE countries that measured volunteer work used two different sources, 31 percent used only one and 22 percent used three or more. Around 74 percent of data sources used for measurement captured both formal and informal volunteering. This share increased from 71 percent to 75 percent after 2014, due to measurements made through the European Union Survey on Income and Living Conditions, labour force surveys and other surveys with specific questions. Over the next decade in the UNECE region an estimated 34 percent of data sources will be used to measure volunteer work every five years (mainly through labour force surveys and general social surveys) and 24 percent every ten years (through time use surveys).



## 4. TOWARDS A REIMAGINED VOLUNTEERISM

The evidence synthesized for this report shows that volunteers continue to make vast contributions to the SDGs and through doing so help ensure that the 2030 Agenda in the UNECE region is owned by all people, for all people. Member States increasingly integrate volunteerism into their development efforts, recognizing volunteerism as a powerful and cross-cutting development modality. Plan of Action stakeholders continue to gather data to better understand the distinctive qualities that volunteers bring to the 2030 Agenda and the support that they require.

Figure 7 Reimagining volunteering for the 2030 Agenda in the UNECE region.



Recognizing the limitations of the evidence base, more needs to be done to deepen understanding of the contribution and impact of volunteerism. Plan of Action stakeholders should take steps to collect evidence systematically across the three Plan of Action thematic areas to inform future SDG planning and implementation. The contributions of informal volunteers and marginalized groups need to be better captured to strengthen the evidence base and broaden policy discourse. The efforts of the region's millions of volunteers should continue to be showcased in VNRs and other reporting mechanisms to ensure that volunteers are better recognized and supported by policymakers, development practitioners and other actors, as integral to the 2030 Agenda.

Some clear initial recommendations have emerged on how to shape and inform further conversations and consultations on volunteerism and the 2030 Agenda in the region, including in the 2019 Regional Forums on Sustainable Development and the lead up to the Global Technical Meeting in 2020. **The recommendations focus on how the potential of volunteerism in the region can be maximized by improving implementation (data, enabling environment, partnerships and technology), as well as key policy areas in which Member States and Plan of Action stakeholders can prioritize volunteers as powerful SDG progress accelerators (inequality, aging, migration, youth employment and climate change).**

While strong mechanisms for measuring volunteerism exist in the UNECE region, the evidence reviewed for this report reveals gaps in data quality and a lack of coordination in approaches. Concerted efforts are needed to **generate high-quality, disaggregated and comparable data on the impact, added value and capacity gaps of volunteerism as a people-centered approach to achieving locally-informed SDG targets.** Better measurement of the scale and scope of volunteerism and the impact of volunteering on individual SDGs will enable Plan of Action stakeholders to better understand and advocate for its support. It will also inform decision-making and monitoring at the national and local

level on when volunteerism is a preferred modality to accelerate SDG progress. This can be done efficiently through the regular application of statistical tools that produce reliable, relevant and comparable data<sup>94</sup> and by ensuring that national statistical systems use harmonized methodologies to generate comparable data. Existing regional data collaborations, such as Eurostat in the European Union, can support the process through the compilation of existing data and advocating for comparable measurement. Last, but not least, volunteering stakeholders need to measure the full range of impacts that volunteers have – including on enhancing social capital, personal development and empowerment – to provide a holistic representation of the multiple benefits of volunteering.

To protect and empower volunteers **UNECE Member States can improve the enabling environment for volunteerism with inclusive laws, policies and norms** adapted to the local context and with minimum standards relating to the protection, security and well-being of volunteers. To develop a truly inclusive enabling environment that empowers and protects *all* volunteers, diverse volunteering stakeholders should be consulted including informal volunteers and volunteers from disempowered, marginalized and minority groups. In keeping with the spirit of the 2030 Agenda, volunteering regulations across the region should focus on opening civic space to maximize citizen participation in achieving the SDGs.

Across the region, people do not have equal access to volunteering opportunities and UNECE Member States should consider ways of widening participation. Ensuring that all people, including the most marginalized and vulnerable, can benefit from volunteering and can access volunteering opportunities is important. For example, social stigma can prevent some people from volunteering and the design of some volunteering schemes can create access barriers for certain groups. This report, therefore, recommends that UNECE Member States **invest in inclusive programmes and schemes so that all people in all places can contribute through, and benefit from, volunteering.**

Local volunteers offer unique knowledge and skills, but they often work in isolation away from global, regional or national initiatives. Fair and equal partnerships, grounded in local norms are needed to connect local volunteers and their organizations with national, regional and global efforts. Volunteering partnerships in which governments, United Nations agencies, VIOs, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector **work more closely with local volunteering groups will contribute to more inclusive and effective volunteering through matching strengths with weaknesses, sharing diverse voices and leveraging existing knowledge.**

New technology is bringing far-reaching changes to volunteerism in the region. Most innovations are not equally spread, have been developed recently and have not yet been widely shared or evaluated. Many VIOs successfully utilize technology in one area, for example in volunteer recruitment and management, but have not yet found technological solutions to assist in other areas, such as training and capacity building. This has both improved access to volunteering opportunities but also created new barriers, such as preventing those with less internet connectivity from volunteering. One step that Plan of Action stakeholders in the UNECE region can take is **to create opportunities and spaces to share technological innovations and best practices in volunteering, including with actors outside the UNECE region, and to jointly assess and evaluate the impact of technological interventions.**

Volunteering is a powerful, cross-cutting development tool that requires policy coherence across all efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda. **Volunteerism can be further mainstreamed into the 2030 Agenda by ensuring it is better integrated into national strategies and policies and legislation across all sectors.** Many UNECE Member States have integrated volunteering into sector strategies focused on youth. However, far fewer policies and strategies focus on mainstreaming volunteering to tackle other major thematic SDG areas. Member States should ensure that volunteerism is mainstreamed across all policy areas,

with regional priorities, such as migration issues, population aging and climate action, prioritized. Volunteers can also be a vital resource to monitor progress towards all SDGs and with their local knowledge and connections, local volunteers in particular can be powerful data collectors, especially for collecting disaggregated data.

Given the limitations of the evidence base, this synthesis report is not able to make a comprehensive analysis of all the policy areas where volunteerism can accelerate SDG progress. However, building on analysis in Chapter 2, it does consider how **volunteers can accelerate and catalyse key SDG policy areas that are lagging behind, namely inequality, aging, migration, youth employment and climate change.** Inequality cuts across all SDGs and the gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ is increasing in many UNECE locations as income inequality widens and social inequality continues to discriminate. But many countries often fail to recognize volunteering as part of the solution. Volunteering should be integrated into broader discussions on social inclusion and inequality, both of which are significant in public discourse. To do this effectively more research needs to be done on how volunteering reduces inequality and builds social cohesion especially among marginalized groups. Volunteering in the UNECE region has the potential to be much more inclusive, and by being more inclusive help reach groups that are hard to reach and furthest behind. In particular, volunteering offers huge opportunities to empower women and should be included in all strategies to achieve SDG 5. The UNECE region is also ageing and special attention should be paid to volunteering interventions that both support and empower older people in line with the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and its Regional Implementation Strategy for 2018-2022. Volunteering can strengthen trust and understanding between people with different backgrounds and so volunteering should also be mainstreamed into policymaking on migration and refugees, building on the Global Compact on Migration’s call for a holistic “whole of society approach.” Finally, volunteering should be fully supported to provide the region’s youth with opportunities to create diverse skill sets

in line with rapidly shifting employment trends and a human-centered agenda for the future of work<sup>95</sup>.

In line with global trends, climate change is the most serious problem that people and countries face in the UNECE region, and without engaging all people in climate action, crucial targets will be missed.

Globally, the UNECE region stands out as being both responsible for some of the main causes of climate change as well as producing many potentially game-changing solutions. Volunteers have an important role to play in both addressing causes and propagating solutions, including through monitoring

climate change and promoting awareness and sustainable behaviour. A final recommendation of this report is that **local and national governments mainstream volunteering into broader climate change mitigation and adaption approaches as part of the all-of-society approach required to achieve Paris Agreement targets**. Volunteers have always been on the frontlines of climate action and environmental protection and with the right investment and integration into broader climate strategies, volunteering can drive climate action in the UNECE region and set powerful examples to inspire global change.

# NOTES

- 1 UNGA, 2018a.
- 2 UNV, 2018a.
- 3 This includes through the Volunteer Groups Alliance, a global coalition of organisations that promote the contributions that volunteers make to sustainable development at local, national and regional levels and in United Nations processes. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/majorgroups/volunteers>.
- 4 ILO, 2018a; UNV, 2018b.
- 5 UNDESA, nd.
- 6 UNECE, 2017a.
- 7 UNDP Armenia, 2017.
- 8 European Union, 2018
- 9 EEC, 2017.
- 10 United Nations Kazakhstan, nd.
- 11 ECOSOC, 2018a.
- 12 UNECE, 2017a.
- 13 UNICEF, 2017.
- 14 WEF, 2018; UNESCAP, 2018; Darvas, 2018; European Union 2018.
- 15 European Commission, 2018a.
- 16 UNECE, 2017a.
- 17 UNECE, 2017b.
- 18 IOM, 2017.
- 19 UNGA, 2019.
- 20 ILO, 2018b; UNDESA, 2016.
- 21 OECD, 2018.
- 22 OECD, 2018.
- 23 ILO, 2017a.
- 24 ILO, 2017b.
- 25 ECOSOC, 2018b.
- 26 European Commission, 2018b; European Commission, 2018c.
- 27 EEA, 2018.
- 28 UNECE, nd.
- 29 UNV, 2018a.
- 30 Government of Malta, 2018a.
- 31 Government of Austria, 2018.
- 32 UNV, 2018b.
- 33 UNV, 2018a.
- 34 European Union, 2017.
- 35 Government of Kazakhstan, 2018.
- 36 Government of France, 2018.
- 37 European Commission, 2017.
- 38 Government of Azerbaijan, 2018.
- 39 Government of Spain, 2018.
- 40 Government of Kazakhstan, 2018.
- 41 Government of Cyprus, 2018; Government of Malta, 2018a; Government of Poland, 2018.
- 42 UNGA, 2018b.
- 43 Government of Malta, 2018b.
- 44 Government of Austria, 2018.
- 45 Government of Croatia, nd.
- 46 Government of France, 2018.
- 47 Government of the Russian Federation, 2018.
- 48 NCVO, 2018.
- 49 UNDP, 2018.
- 50 UNV, 2018a.
- 51 Government of Azerbaijan, 2018.
- 52 UNECE, 2017c.
- 53 NCVO, 2018.
- 54 European Union, nd.
- 55 UNHCR, 2017.
- 56 UNHCR, 2015.
- 57 IFRC, 2017.
- 58 Government of Canada, 2018.
- 59 UNV, 2018b.
- 60 Croatia's 2007 Law on Volunteering.
- 61 Government of the Czech Republic, 2018.

- 62 European Commission, 2010a.
- 63 NCVO, 2018.
- 64 Government of Ireland, nd.
- 65 European Commission, 2018d.
- 66 European Commission, 2018e.
- 67 UNECE, 2017c.
- 68 Government of Azerbaijan, 2018; Government of Austria, 2018; Lithuania: Order on description of the Youth Voluntary Service; UNGA, 2018b.
- 69 NCVO, 2018.
- 70 Government of Azerbaijan, 2018.
- 71 UNGA, 2018b.
- 72 Government of Austria, 2018.
- 73 UNGA, 2018b; Government of Austria, 2018.
- 74 IFRC, nd.
- 75 National Water Quality Monitoring Council, nd.
- 76 UNGA, 2018b.
- 77 UNV, nd.
- 78 European Commission, nd.
- 79 NOREC, 2017.
- 80 Council of Europe and European Union, nd.
- 81 ILO, 2018c.
- 82 ILO, 2018a.
- 83 ILO, 2011.
- 84 ILO, 2018a.
- 85 ILO, 2018a.
- 86 European Commission, 2010b.
- 87 Canada: General Social Survey – Giving, Volunteering and Participating, 2013/2018; Germany: German Survey on Volunteering, 2014; Ireland: Quarterly National Household Survey, Quarter 3, 2013, Module on Volunteering and Well-Being; Moldova: Volunteer Work, as ad-hoc module to the LFS 2015; Portugal: Enquête aux Travail Bénévole, 2012/ Inquérito ao Trabalho Voluntário, 2012; UK: Community Life Survey, 2017.
- 88 Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, United Kingdom.
- 89 Government of Cyprus, 2018.
- 90 Government of Germany, 2018.
- 91 UNGA, 2018b.
- 92 Statistics Poland, 2013.
- 93 Government of the Czech Republic, 2018.
- 94 ILO, 2018b.

# ANNEXES

## ANNEX A. KEY SOURCES

This report is based on inputs from Member States of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) through National Situation Analyses submitted in 2018, Voluntary National Reviews and contributions to the 2018 Secretary-General's Report on volunteering.

| National Situation Analyses | Voluntary National Reviews | Submissions to the 2018 Secretary-General's Report on Volunteering |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Austria                     | Albania                    | Azerbaijan   |
| Azerbaijan                  | Andorra                    | Cyprus   |
| Cyprus                      | Armenia                    | Georgia  |
| Czech Republic              | Canada                     | Germany  |
| France                      | Greece                     | Norway   |
| Germany                     | Hungary                    | Turkey   |
| Kazakhstan                  | Ireland                    | Ukraine  |
| Malta                       | Latvia                     |  |
| Russian Federation          | Lithuania                  |  |
| United Kingdom              | Malta                      |  |
|                             | Poland                     |  |
|                             | Romania                    |  |
|                             | Slovakia                   |  |
|                             | Spain                      |  |
|                             | Switzerland                |  |

## ANNEX B. TERMS AND CONCEPTS

For the purposes of the report, **volunteerism** is understood to be “a wide range of activities undertaken of free will, for the general public good, for which monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor” (UNGA, 2002).

**Formal volunteering** usually involves volunteers making a regular commitment and contributing their time to a civil society organization, governmental organization or private sector company (UNV, 2015).

**Informal volunteering** happens outside of organizational structures and takes different forms, including community-based activities and larger-scale mobilization of citizens, for example to respond to humanitarian disasters (UNV, 2015).

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# PLAN OF ACTION FOR INTEGRATING VOLUNTEERISM INTO THE 2030 AGENDA

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The **Plan of Action for Integrating Volunteerism into the 2030 Agenda** is a framework under the auspices of the United Nations through which governments, United Nations agencies, volunteer-involving organizations, civil society organizations, academia and the private sector **come together to accelerate the impact of volunteerism for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** by: a) strengthening people's ownership of the 2030 Agenda; b) integrating and mainstreaming volunteering into national strategies and policies; and c) better measuring the impact of volunteers.

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**Plan of Action**  
to integrate volunteering  
into the 2030 Agenda