

## Chapter 7

# Conclusion and recommendations: Volunteerism – helping build equal and inclusive societies

## 7.1. Introduction

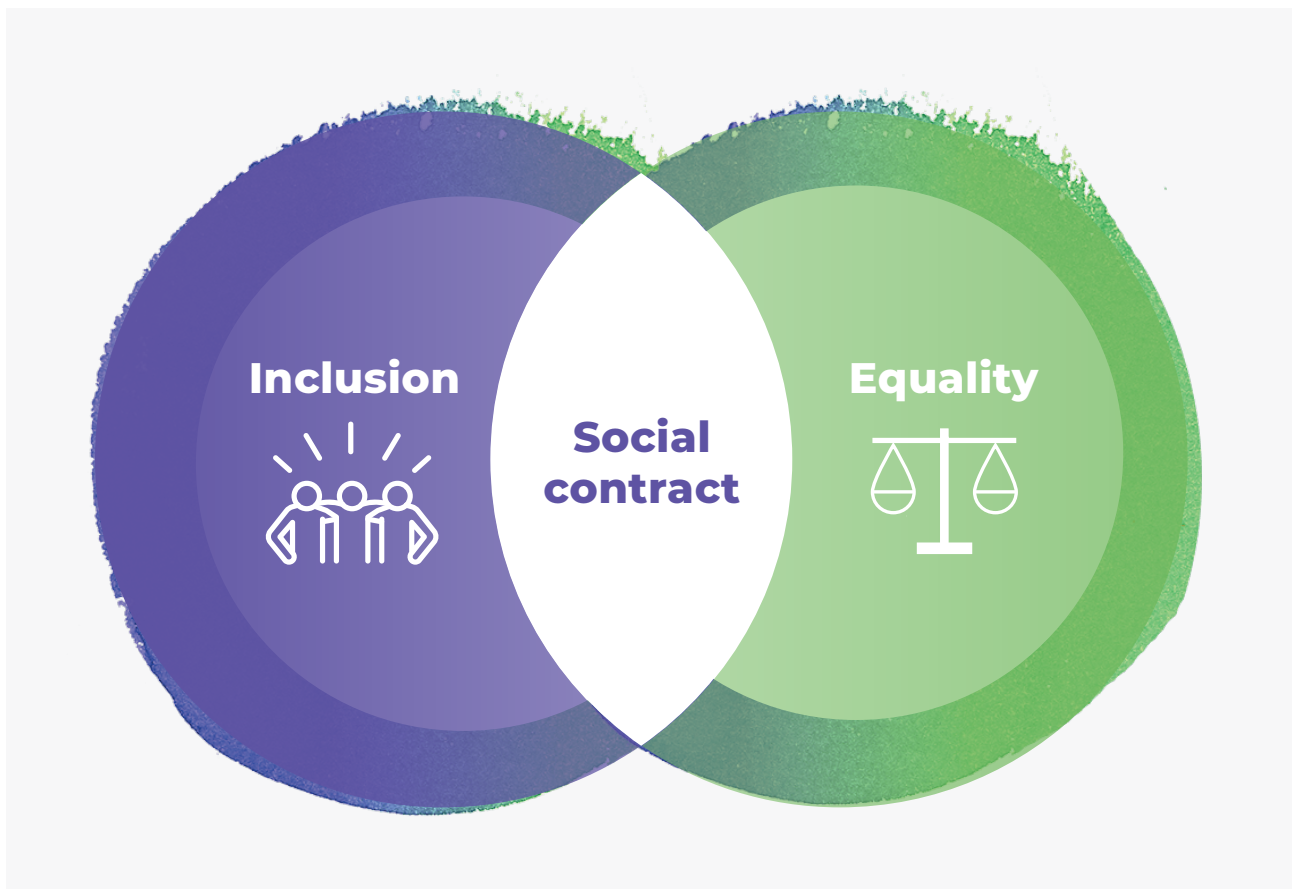
This report provides evidence that volunteerism is a fundamental part of building and strengthening people–state relationships. In turn, these relations lead to better governance that promotes sustainable development and peace, helping to build equal and inclusive societies.

In various ways, volunteers have been answering the call for collaborative people–state decision-making and action. Volunteers have worked with the state, playing

important and diverse roles in deliberative governance, in the co-production of services and in social innovation. Now more than ever, partnerships are critical as communities and countries strive to build forward better towards a more equal and inclusive future that leaves no one behind.

Volunteer–state partnerships are an important mechanism for expanding volunteers' roles in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and can play a role in laying the foundation for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century social contract that is founded on inclusion and equality, and responds to the needs of communities.

**Figure 7.1.** A social contract for equal and inclusive societies



In addition, partnerships between volunteer groups and state authorities have been identified as important mechanisms for expanding volunteers' roles in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in this important Decade of Action.

Drawing from the findings of the research, this final chapter identifies the key messages of the report and provides policy recommendations for policymakers, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), volunteer groups and other development actors.

## 7.2. Key messages: volunteering's contribution to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century social contract

Public participation in governance has already been recognized as central to co-production and collaboration with the state, particularly in relation to building equal and inclusive societies and developing a new social contract. This SWVR reveals the value that voluntary participation can bring to public decision-making. Individuals—especially those in the most marginalized communities—can become active collaborators, stakeholders, advocates and leaders.



A group of volunteers come together from different organizations for nature conservation in Peru. Source: UNV.



## Volunteerism can help build a culture of collaborative decision-making.

### This report has shown that volunteers are committed to inclusion.

Many volunteers contribute to shaping and prioritizing issues that are important to them. Where there are gaps in the way local policies are implemented, volunteers work with local government officials to make public services more relevant and responsive to their needs and those of their communities. With some volunteers working in the community they came from, their sense of solidarity propels them to participate in deliberation, co-implementing government programmes and sharing innovative ideas. Their first-hand and highly contextual knowledge has proved to be crucial in developing innovative and responsive public policies and programmes.

In Nepal, for instance, traditional methods of flood prevention by Barghars were combined with a local engineer's knowledge, which led to stronger and more durable structures for effective flood protection. Through volunteering in public spaces and platforms, these volunteers are aspiring for better governance. In the Malawi case study (see chapter 6), community-based volunteers took new and creative approaches to dialogue so that government community health workers could develop better processes, tailor-made for young people living with HIV.

However, there are also groups and people who may not want to participate, or do not see deliberation and partnership with the state as the solution. This often relates to differing expectations of people and state authorities when developing social contracts. In the case of the Nebhana Water Forum in Tunisia, community members were initially suspicious of partnering with local state institutions. In Kyrgyzstan, it was the village heads and village members who were hesitant to partner with the women's groups, uncertain whether dialogue and partnership was the best way forward. This also illustrates that entering into any partnership relies on the "buy-in" of all parties and highlights how local volunteers, volunteer organizations and state institutions often have different priorities, agendas and focuses.

Still, the desire for better governance, coupled with a community's commitment to help make that happen through volunteerism, helps build a culture not only of accountability, but also of participatory, collaborative decision-making.



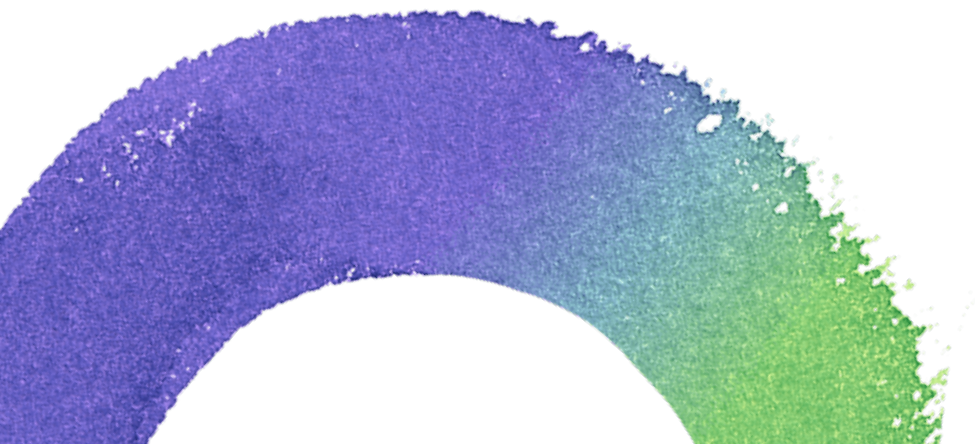
## Volunteerism can alter unequal power relations.

**This report provides evidence that challenges the commonly held belief that volunteers serve “instrumental roles”, mostly filling in the gaps in government services and helping deliver “development as usual”.**

Volunteers have the capacity, through collaboration, to reconfigure unequal power relationships between ordinary citizens and state authorities. For example, peasant farmers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC; see chapter 5) were able to persuade local government officials to revise their agricultural pricing and take account of farmers' spending capacities and realities. This and other examples in the report show that with appropriate support, all groups can take up more active roles as volunteers with voice and agency, claiming their rightful place in decision-making spaces. Partnering with the state has allowed volunteers in Kazakhstan to scale up and reach more people living with disabilities in the country, helping them to find employment (see chapter 5). In this way, volunteerism allows people not only to shape the development agenda but also to own it.

With regards to state institutions and other organizations, this report has found that local governments built on local/informal systems, leadership and practices to create spaces for people-centred discussions. For instance, following the shift to a decentralized governance structure in Nepal, local government units reached out to traditional institutions and mutual aid groups such as Guthi and Barghar to expand the impact of their public discussions (see chapter 4).

The case studies also teach us that adopting an inclusive and participatory approach to public governance can promote people's understanding of, and interest in, equality and shared social responsibility.





## **Volunteerism offers diverse pathways to civic participation but remains unequal.**

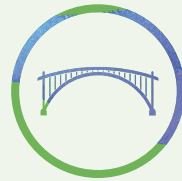
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**The case studies show that faced with increasingly complex issues, community-based volunteers have diverse causes to volunteer for and various channels for volunteering.**

Volunteers often engage with multiple activities that match their interests and priorities (a key finding in chapter 3). Their activities are not limited solely to those set by an organization. Instead, volunteers' engagement tends to be more self-directed; they act autonomously and do not focus solely on one role.

Chapters 2 and 3 presented evidence that women are more likely than men to volunteer informally and that they tend to participate in volunteering as a “service” rather than in initiatives that focus on decision-making. This highlights the gender gap in volunteering practices and aspirations. While the surge in volunteering among men during the pandemic should be sustained, more attention needs to be given to gender differences in terms of time spent volunteering. A greater understanding of how women's availability has been affected by wider caregiving and domestic responsibilities during the pandemic is also needed.

Inclusion remains a challenge. In the case of farmers in Tunisia, their geographic spread and vast numbers made it difficult to ensure that they were adequately represented during public discussions (see chapter 4). In addition, community-based volunteers were the end users of many programmes and services that they helped to implement, placing them in the unique intersection of being both the “giver” and the “receiver” of services. Many of the volunteers in the case studies worked with and/or were members of marginalized populations in a community (e.g. peasant farmers, indigenous groups, rural women, informal settlers and people living with disabilities). This meant that volunteers had similar vulnerabilities and experienced similar marginalization to the people they were serving.



## Volunteers build bridges.

**Volunteers are in the unique position of brokering relationships between service providers and beneficiaries, a connection that is weakened by administrative red tape, and differing agendas and starting points.**

Community-based volunteers in these case studies acted as mediators between various groups such as local community associations and state institutions, often helping them to navigate bureaucratic processes. For example, youth volunteers in Amel (Lebanon) were trained to better understand the legislation concerning migrant domestic workers in the country. This knowledge was valuable when helping women domestic workers who needed vaccines but did not have identification cards, and their work included translating important Arabic documents into English (or local languages) so that they were more accessible (see chapter 5). Volunteers serve as effective mediators when dealing with complex processes; in future they could take on similar roles.

The case studies also demonstrate how volunteering cuts across different sectors that are addressing a variety of SDGs. There are volunteer–state partnerships aiming for enhanced agricultural practices (SDG 2), increased women’s participation and gender equality (SDG 5), better employment (SDG 8), inclusive cities (SDG 11) and more. This demonstrates that volunteerism can be a means of localizing and integrating different global goals.

### **7.3. Volunteering towards building equal and inclusive societies: policy recommendations**

Recognizing volunteerism as a powerful and crosscutting means of implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN Development System’s 2020 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) encourages the UN Development

System, Member States, civil society and the private sector to support efforts to promote the integration of different models of volunteerism in development frameworks.

Based on the research findings, the proposed policy recommendations, which build on UN frameworks, could enable volunteerism to better harness emerging models that can be a resource and asset towards building equal and inclusive societies.



## 1. Address barriers to volunteering faced by marginalized groups.

**Marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, rural women and LGBTQI groups often bear the brunt of inequality.**

If these groups face exclusion, or barriers to participation such as limited mobility, home responsibilities or difficulty accessing information, there may be a need for strategies that make deliberative spaces more accessible to them. Integrating a variety of approaches and channels for volunteer participation in deliberative governance processes across all levels can help in this regard. Examples of this in action include Egypt's National Initiative for the Development of Egyptian Villages (Hayah Karima), a community awareness-raising programme in which state authorities engage youth in leadership in initiatives that are designed to ensure that young volunteers from marginalized communities can engage in decision-making processes.

**Policymakers** can adopt policies to ensure access and inclusion so that marginalized groups and volunteers can address the barriers that limit their participation in deliberative governance processes. Policies aimed at promoting partnerships between volunteers and government and other entities, including the private sector, can be important in this regard. For example, the Philippines' 2007 Volunteer Act mandated national government agencies and local governments to establish volunteer programmes in their institutions in order to promote and encourage partnerships with volunteers. This led to the establishment of the Volunteer Program for Government Service (BBP).

Developing governance structures that enable volunteers to engage in the design and implementation of development programmes in collaboration with state authorities is critical. In Bangladesh, volunteers actively engage in participatory poverty mapping or community development committees where they provide much-needed support in raising the capacities of the urban poor. To foster partnerships with volunteers, government authorities at the national, regional and local level (i.e. municipalities) can develop policies that provide a framework to support the development and integration of partnerships with volunteers within their institutions.

Besides traditional spaces such as citizen assemblies, town-hall meetings and community councils, policymakers may also consider adopting measures to ensure greater access to and inclusion in decision-making by supporting tech-based approaches that complement traditional approaches such as crowdsourcing and open government platforms.





## 2. Leverage partnerships through volunteering.

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**Building on local/informal systems of support, leadership and practices when developing volunteer–state relationships is critical.**

Doing so increases the legitimacy and ownership of development programmes and helps build trust between state authorities and volunteers. Governments, volunteer-involving organizations and other stakeholders should pay greater attention to knowledge systems, practices and informal systems of support, and devise ways to integrate these in designing sustainable volunteering partnerships.

**Policymakers** can leverage pre-existing networks of support, volunteering practices and values when developing policies around volunteerism, particularly those that promote partnerships between volunteers and other stakeholders. Recognizing the importance of partnerships between volunteers, volunteer-involving organizations and the government, Bangladesh is co-creating a National Volunteer Policy with various stakeholders that aims to embed volunteerism within the national development policies and significantly strengthen local government institutions. Besides mainstreaming volunteerism in state institutions, the policy aims to promote partnerships between volunteers, the private sector and development partners.



### 3. Adopt gender-sensitive measures to address inequalities.

**As women face barriers to volunteerism, in particular less engagement in decision-making activities, compared with their male counterparts, their access to decision-making processes needs to be ensured.**

To ensure that volunteerism remains a viable pathway for amplifying women's voices and agency as well as ownership in the development process, the ongoing barriers that women and other gender groups face need to be better understood.

**Policymakers** can adopt gender-sensitive measures that optimize women's participation in volunteering, such as ensuring their access to decision-making processes. Understanding the ongoing barriers that women face in volunteering is important. Studies that assess how collaborative decision-making processes reinforce or challenge gender norms as well as other gender inequalities in volunteerism across countries and regions can help to close this gap.



A group of volunteers come together to discuss the importance of loma preservation in Lúcumo, Lima, Peru. Source: UNV.



A volunteer advocates for the protection of the local ecosystem in Peru. Source: UNV.



#### 4. Leverage volunteers' expertise, knowledge and experiences.

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**As the findings of the research show, public policy discussions and consultations that consider and build on multiple ideas, perspectives, local and indigenous practices, and concepts of volunteering lead to more productive outcomes such as more responsive and tailor-made development programmes.**

It is therefore vital to recognize the knowledge and experience that volunteers from marginalized communities bring and more importantly to harness it for development. In addition, as volunteers tend to engage in diverse civic activities, there is a need to consider diverse approaches to civic participation when developing new volunteer-led programmes and initiatives that align with people's work, leisure, needs and interests.

**Policymakers** should recognize the expertise of volunteers, particularly in relation to facilitating or creating an enabling environment for the full utilization of their skills. This includes adopting policy measures aimed at enabling volunteers from marginalized communities to engage in decision-making processes, which can also build their skills. Policymakers should also consider building on the strong interest in diverse forms of volunteering beyond service delivery, including social innovation and civic engagement.



## 5. Promote social innovation.

### **Volunteer–state partnerships provide an impetus for volunteer action.**

Volunteers' commitment to shared values, which are often based around ideas of inclusion and equality and collaboration with state authorities, strengthens their contribution to social innovation in development where it is needed most.

**Policymakers** should promote measures that support the development of new ideas in order to enable innovations that align with and are more responsive to communities' development needs. To facilitate social innovation, inclusive policies should be adopted that enable marginalized groups to engage. Measures to support social innovation, such as crowdsourcing and open government platforms, should also be considered. However, care should be taken to ensure that any measures adopted do not exacerbate digital inequalities, particularly among marginalized groups.



## 6. Recognize informal volunteers' work and contributions.

### **As informal volunteers in resource-poor contexts generally receive less recognition and less practical support, recognizing their time, effort and contributions is vital and can boost their motivation to engage in volunteering.**

The Bangladesh Volunteer Award, which recognizes the country's volunteers and was launched by Bangladesh's Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives; WaterAid, and UNV Bangladesh, is a good example of this.

**Policymakers** should consider developing mechanisms for valuing volunteers for the work that they do, from recognizing their opinions and their input in decisions, to social protection for volunteers in marginalized communities. Policymakers should also recognize volunteers' contributions through various forms of incentives such as social recognition to meet their desire to feel needed and valued.



## 7. Invest in volunteer data, research and measurement.

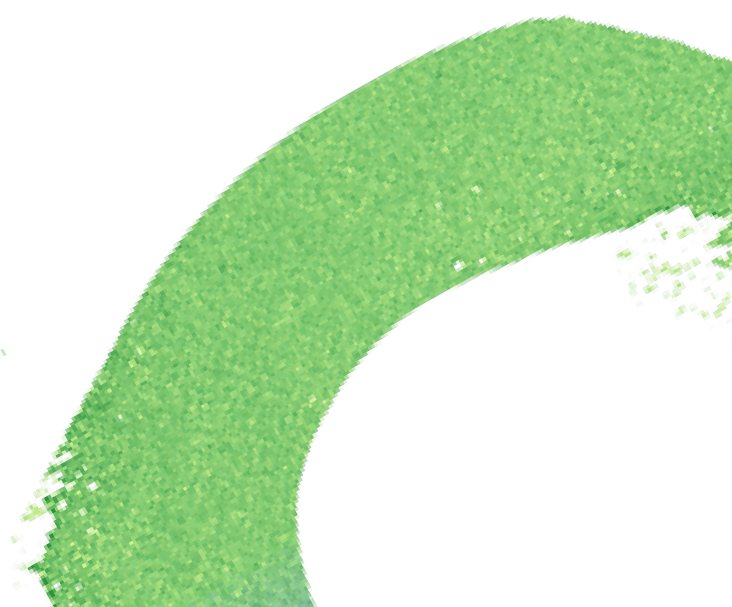
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**Estimating the scale and scope of volunteerism remains a challenge as data are scarce and inadequate, which often leads to the exclusion of volunteering activities from development plans and budgets.**

Strengthening the capacities of countries and regions to collect data on volunteerism, including informal volunteerism which is prevalent in the Global South, is critical.

Data collection and measurement are needed to better understand the contribution of volunteering to the development, needs and capabilities of volunteers from diverse backgrounds. Any effort to measure volunteering needs to be disaggregated by factors such as gender, socio-economic status, urban/rural location and age. This helps policymakers and practitioners to gain a better understanding of volunteering in countries and regions and globally.

**Policymakers** should invest in the measurement of volunteering to close the gap in volunteering data, and generate better-quality, more comparable data that captures the contribution of volunteering to development across countries and regions. To close the gap in data and measurement, policymakers should also explore partnerships with entities at the national level (i.e. national statistical offices), the regional level (i.e. with regional organizations) and the international level (i.e. with ILO and other partners) for data collection and better measurement of volunteering.



## Volunteer voices: Reimagining the future of volunteering

**Volunteers from Mali, India and Ecuador reflect on the question, “In the ‘new normal’, is there anything you would like to see done differently in terms of how volunteers work together with other stakeholders, such as government and the private sector?”**

*As the pandemic aggravated Mali’s fragile health system, volunteers were the only actors present on the ground to raise awareness. Going forward, stronger partnerships and better coordination of volunteers and other stakeholders, including government authorities, will be necessary in order to rebuild effectively post pandemic.*

– Makan Dramé, Mali

*In the aftermath of the pandemic, issues need to be approached differently. There will be a need to raise awareness among women, adolescent girls, men and village elders, the state, district- and village-level authorities... After the pandemic we are faced with a new normal, but we also have new challenges.*

*Volunteers have a role in creating a fairer society in rural and indigenous communities post-COVID. As front-line workers at the field level who directly interact with stakeholders, volunteers in rural and indigenous communities have a deep understanding and knowledge of their socio-economic needs. As such, we are better placed to respond with simple solutions to the challenges faced by these communities, whether it is in implementing development programmes, creating awareness and adapting behaviour of local/indigenous communities, or enabling access to government schemes and programmes.*

– Sumitra Sahu, India

*Volunteers should be considered as technical specialists who contribute to the decision-making of strategic actions that are oriented to the reactivation of society through programmes with a focus on gender, interculturality and active participation with other local actors.*

– Sumak Bastidas, Ecuador

# Special contribution: Nabaloum Boureima, the Director-General, Programme Nationale de Volontariat au Burkina Faso, Burkina Faso's national volunteer programme

Nabaloum Boureima, the Director-General of the Programme Nationale de Volontariat au Burkina Faso [Burkina Faso National Volunteering Programme – PNVB] explains the role that volunteers, particularly female volunteers, play in Burkina Faso's development.

## The role of volunteers in Burkina Faso's development

Burkina Faso has a long-standing history of volunteerism thanks to a tradition that is steeped in solidarity and mutual aid, and this is reflected in its traditional and modern volunteering and civic engagement practices. Building on this, since its establishment in 2008, PNVB, a public entity, has mobilized more than 48,000 national volunteers through its programmes, the majority of whom are young women and girls. Volunteers support several key priority areas, among them health, decentralization and education. As part of efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19, in 2020, 14,172 volunteers provided services to over 7 million people. Besides the national volunteers mobilized by PNVB, some other volunteer initiatives have been implemented across the 13 regions of the country, among them the Volunteer Security Auxiliaries (VADS) programme which, since 2013, has mobilized more than 10,000 volunteers, of whom 35 percent are women. There is also the Green Brigade which has more than 3,000 female volunteers who, over the past 22 years, have contributed to improving urban sanitation and ensured a healthy living environment.