

VOLUNTEERING: CONNECTING THE GLOBAL AGENDA ON SUSTAINABILITY TO THE COMMUNITY LEVEL *

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DEFINITIONS

Volunteering takes multiple forms and can have different meanings depending on the context. Common definitions usually encompass the following dimensions: (i) voluntary provision of time, expertise and/or labour on behalf of others, occasionally or regularly; (ii) material or financial reward not seen as main motivating factor; (iii) benefits for the general public good, beyond the volunteer's familial circle; and (iv) whether activities are performed through a formal organisation or informally (Cnaan et al. 1996; UN 2002; IFRC 2011a; Graham et al. 2013; Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015; UNV 2018a). The terms volunteering and volunteerism are often used interchangeably, but some argue that 'volunteering' is centred on the volunteer as the main actor whilst 'volunteerism' relates to a wider set of stakeholders and practices (Schech et al. 2018). Volunteering is not synonymous with concepts such as altruism, benevolence, charity, civic service, gifting, mutual aid, philanthropy, self-help, social activism, solidarity, etc., but is frequently associated with them.

INTRODUCTION

This article reviews literature about volunteering and looks at how it connects the global agenda on sustainability to the community level. The article is divided into four main sections. The first section will introduce key ideas from current debates, especially where formal/informal and international/local aspects of volunteering are concerned. The second part will focus on local volunteering, questioning recurrent assumptions to discuss agency at local levels. The third section will contextualise volunteering within the sustainable development agenda through an examination of international milestones over the past ten years, and how volunteering has been referenced in the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The final section presents local volunteers as active actors of community development that promote sustainable practices within their own contexts. The article concludes by encouraging further qualitative research, especially in the global South, to listen to local volunteers and disseminate their experiences, allowing their voices to shape the global agenda on sustainability.

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A SNAPSHOT INTO VOLUNTEERING DEBATES

Volunteering is spread across borders and ultimately stands for a driving force that unites peoples from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, occupations, education, gender or age, to cite a few of distinguishable social traits. Despite the existence of various theoretical and conceptual models, Hustinx et al. (2010, p. 410) argue that no integrated theory about volunteering has yet emerged. Volunteering is a complex phenomenon to theorise because of its multiple meanings depending on the context. Typologies have advanced to reflect on the “multidimensional, multiform, and multilevel nature of contemporary volunteering” (Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003, p. 169), and volunteers have been increasingly recognised as change-makers. Volunteering has also been described as a channel for tackling problems in inclusive ways because it creates “conditions for the underprivileged to take charge of their own destiny, to advance beyond present conditions and build their own future on the basis of their own values” (Beigbeder 1991, p. 104).

Wilson and Musick (1997, p. 694) discuss formal and informal volunteer work based on the grounds that volunteering is “productive work that requires human capital, collective behaviour that requires social capital, and ethically guided work that requires cultural capital”. The authors claim that despite formal volunteering and informal volunteering being related, each of them relies on different types of capital and have different reciprocal effects. Formal volunteering traditionally occurs through non-profit organisations and/or other formal settings, while informal volunteering implies direct engagement with people outside one’s household as an independent expression of community, cultural or social participation (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015, p. 22; UNV 2018a, p. 12).

The United Nations (UN) refers to volunteering and volunteerism as “a wide range of activities, including traditional forms of mutual aid and self-help, formal service delivery and other forms of civic participation, undertaken of free will, for the general public good and where monetary reward is not the principal motivating factor” (UN 2002, p. 3). The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the world’s largest volunteer-based humanitarian network, defines its volunteering activities as those carried out occasionally or regularly “by people motivated by free will, and not by a desire for material or financial gain, or by external social, economic or political pressure” (IFRC 2011a, p. 1). In its reporting system, volunteers are referred to as those who have voluntarily supported the delivery of services for at least four hours during the reporting year (IFRC 2019, p. 19).

Research looking at cross-national differences in volunteering have found that despite institutionalised and formal volunteering being more common in the global North, the nature of “person-to-person helping is truly universal”, with “informal volunteering predate[ing] the earliest formal voluntary associations [...] present in all human societies, even those without formal volunteering” (Butcher and Einolf 2017, pp. 4–6). Whilst the differentiation between formal and informal volunteering is widespread, it inevitably oversimplifies the volunteering experience. Volunteers themselves do not necessarily see boundaries between both types of involvement. Instead of considering these as necessarily opposing, we must recognise how different modalities overlap in order to break down silos and move towards an understanding of sustainable volunteering.

Despite growing support for volunteering to contribute to the achievement of humanitarian and development goals, there is a persistent “tendency to assume that definitions and norms developed in the global North are universally applicable and relevant” (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015, p. 18). The International Labour Organisation (ILO), for example, understands volunteer work as “unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organisation or directly for others outside their own household” (ILO 2011, p. 13). The types of

volunteer work covered by the “scope of the recommended definition” in its Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work (ILO 2011, p. 17), however, do not necessarily apply to every context, especially in the global South. Multiple understandings of the scope of ‘work’ and ‘household’ challenge the universality of this approach.

North-South relationships are constantly part of discussions about volunteering and development, especially in relation to international volunteering. Scholarly work in this area has mainly looked at the experiences of Northern actors temporarily placed in the South (Baillie Smith et al. 2017, p. 7). Conventional ideas about ‘development actors’, therefore, usually place the focus on international volunteers. This, however, presents the risk of perpetrating stereotypes of Western saviours and reinforcing hierarchies based on assumptions of superior ‘aid givers’ and inferior ‘aid receivers’ (Georgeou 2012, p. 21). International volunteering involves a formal assignment, a period of engagement that is valued by society “with no or minimal monetary compensation to the participant who serves at least part of the time in another country” (Sherraden et al. 2006, p. 165). In this sense, an international volunteer is frequently pictured as “someone who willingly works overseas, often in ‘developing’ countries, for a package that amounts to less than what s/he would be earning in the same capacity in his/her country of origin” (Palmer 2002, p. 637). Issues of remuneration and rewards in volunteering are critical features of its changing meanings and practices (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015, p. 11) and their implications for sustainable volunteering activity have not yet been fully explored by literature.

Roles, motivations and struggles of international volunteers have reached far more scholarly attention than those of so-called local, domestic or community-based volunteers (Devereux 2008; Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011). However, evidence suggests that “whilst international volunteering has yielded significant benefits for host organisations and communities, it has had far less impact on long-term development”, making the case for a closer look on whether local volunteering “can potentially generate more sustainable outcomes than other forms of volunteering” (Burns et al. 2015, p. 15). This is not aimed at reinforcing contrapositions, but rather recognising that the ‘localisation’ of humanitarian and development agendas has been an increasingly necessary shift to enable a better picture of challenges on the ground. In line not only with the Agenda 2030 but also with the Grand Bargain and the Agenda for Humanity, agreed upon during the 2016 United Nations World Humanitarian Summit, investing in local capacities is part of the core commitments of working differently to act upon shared responsibilities for humanity (UN 2016). This calls for recognition of neighbouring relationships as a source of social capital and the importance of understanding how volunteering is undertaken close to home, addressing local concerns (Wilson and Son 2018).

Studies about how volunteerism is perceived by local community members acknowledge that often “community perceptions exist in an iterative and inherently porous relationship with wider contexts [...] yet it is at the local level that multiple understandings are both contested and realised in volunteer practice” (Lewis 2015, p. 70). Where sustainable development is concerned, it is imperative to overcome patronising imaginaries of local communities passively waiting for help to come from external sources. In every context, locals are constantly taking action according to their capacities to alleviate their own vulnerabilities – and volunteering is one of the possible ways through which these efforts are channeled.

A CLOSER LOOK INTO 'LOCAL' COMPLEXITIES

Looking at the complexity of 'local' is crucial to a clearer understanding of local volunteering within the sustainable development agenda. The 'comparative advantage' of local actors is explained by their proximity, access and strong understanding of local circumstances, which allows for trustful and stronger connections with communities. However, there are underlying risks and ambiguities when investigating the impacts of being local from the experience of volunteers themselves. Therefore, we must start by questioning assumptions about advantages, access and acceptance of volunteers at community level (Thomas et al. 2018a, p. 3).

Central challenges to looking at bottom-up development processes often involve "the lack of understanding of the political economies of poverty; the failure to problematise participation; and the reliance on overly simplistic ideas of communities as homogeneous, ignoring processes of inequality and exclusion within communities" (Hilhorst et al. 2017, p. 1109). This is echoed by Titz et al. (2018, p. 2) who argue that "referring to 'local' or 'place-based' communities displays a rather one-dimensional and static understanding of community, ignoring social dynamics and the multiple, sometimes conflicting, layers of meaning that are embedded in the term". Different studies have shown concrete examples in which populations will neither consider an organisation based in the provincial capital as local as the one based in their own community (Barbelet et al. 2019, p. 9), nor will necessarily see volunteers from a different village entitled to act in a new setting even if in the same region (Thomas et al. 2018a, p. 3).

In fact, 'community-based' is part of the terminology commonly invoked by academics and policy-makers to refer to participatory approaches to volunteering. Community-related terminology, however, is ambivalent and less homogeneous than often assumed. Two core elements that contribute to its understanding involve (i) social relationships, interaction and affinity; and (ii) place, both as territory and as constructed spaces of meaning (Titz et al. 2018, p. 9). The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement defines community as "a group of people who may or may not live within the same area, village or neighbourhood; who may or may not share similar culture, habits and resources; and who are exposed to the same threats and risks, such as disease, political and economic issues, and natural disasters" (IFRC 2014, p. 10). As underlined by Thomas et al. (2018a, p. 3), "despite often being portrayed as fixed in time and parochial, local communities are inherently dynamic and flexible in nature".

Each day more, affected communities are recognised not only as victims but also agents of change. Traditional dichotomies are increasingly challenged to acknowledge overlapping identities of 'giver' and 'receiver' and understand how local actors can be both victims and volunteers in changing contexts (Thomas et al. 2018b, p. 2; Baillie Smith et al. 2019). However, a romanticised perspective over local volunteering risks failing to consider "countervailing influences of powerful interests, local elites, social differences and prejudices related to gender, class, caste and ethnic differences within communities, which can block inclusive action" (UNV 2018a, p. 46). Local volunteering will not necessarily make a positive contribution if, for example, it reproduces patterns of social exclusion or gendered social norms in the context of conflicts and emergencies (Cadesky et al. 2019, p. 381).

Questioning assumptions and problematising local complexities is a necessary step towards fully understanding agency and ownership that drive sustainable volunteering at community level, where development action effectively takes place. This is connected to the relational and people-centred characteristics of volunteering. As stressed by Hazeldine and Baillie Smith (2015, p. 3), "volunteerism, if appropriately supported, can ensure that development agendas are owned at the local level, that they are developed appropriately in line with cultural and social contexts, and that initiatives reach those who are living in the hardest to reach areas".

VOLUNTEERING IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GLOBAL AGENDA

The association between volunteering and development “has evolved over time as trends in development paradigms respond to changing national and international contexts” (Lopez Franco and Shahrokh 2015, p. 20). Volunteering has been increasingly recognised as a “powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation” of the SDGs which stand for “a far-reaching and people-centred set of universal and transformative goals and targets” (UN 2015).

Table 1. Global Milestones on Volunteering and Sustainable Development in Multilateral Spaces

2010	- UN MDG Summit commitment to include voluntary associations into its broader civil society stakeholder constituency “to enhance their role in national development efforts as well as their contribution to the achievement of the MDGs by 2015” [UN Resolution A/RES/65/1].
2011	- Wide mobilisation around volunteering during the 10 th anniversary of the International Year of Volunteers and publication of the first “State of the World's Volunteerism Report”. - Need to include volunteering in all plans for sustainable development and human well-being highlighted in the Declaration adopted at 64 th DPI/NGO Conference. - Recognition of volunteers as actors for development effectiveness at the International Framework for Civil Society Organization Development Effectiveness.
2012	- Acknowledgement on RIO+20 Outcome Document of “volunteers groups” as stakeholders whose active participation is required for sustainable development [UN Resolution A/RES/66/288]. - Volunteering contributions recognised on the Report of the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) as significant “to the attainment of the MDGs, foster social cohesion and enhance social inclusion, life skills, employability, resilience and community well-being”; report also praises volunteerism as “an integral part of the post-2015 development framework” [Report of the UNSG A/67/153]. - Adoption of UN Resolution "Integrating volunteering in the next decade" that requests the Secretary-General to report in 2015 on a plan of action to “integrate volunteering in peace and development in the next decade and beyond” [UN Resolution A/RES/67/138].
2013	- UN Resolution A/RES/67/290 and UNSG Report A/68/202 namely identify “volunteer groups” as relevant stakeholders with whom governments should make partnerships to implement and respond to the sustainable development agenda. - Final report “A Million Voices: the world we want” on the consultations about the post-MDGs contains several references to the importance of volunteerism for the post-2015 development agenda.
2014	- UNSG Synthesis Report A/69/700 “The Road to Dignity by 2030” underlines that: "As we seek to build capacities and to help the new agenda to take root, volunteerism can be another powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation. Volunteerism can help to expand and mobilise constituencies, and to engage people in national planning and implementation for sustainable development goals. And volunteer groups can help to localise the new agenda by providing new spaces of interaction between governments and people for concrete and scalable actions" (UN 2015).
2015	- Adoption of Agenda 2030 [UN Resolution A/RES/70/1] in which “volunteer groups” are mentioned among the means of implementation of the new framework; similar mention in the UN resolution A/RES/69/313 on the Addis Ababa Action Agenda. - Adoption of UN resolution A/RES/70/129 “Integrating volunteering in peace and development: the Plan of Action for the next decade and beyond” which welcomes the UNSG Report A/70/118 presenting the Plan of Action. - Launch of Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement first “Global Review on Volunteering” and publication of the second “State of the World's Volunteerism Report” focused on transforming governance.
2018	- Adoption of UN Resolution A/C.3/73/L.13 “Volunteering for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”; and the UNSG Report A/73/254 on the Plan of Action to integrate volunteering into Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development calls for a Global Technical Meeting in 2020, preceded by regional preparatory meetings in 2019. - UNV Strategic Framework 2018-2021 outcomes are focused on supporting the delivery of Agenda 2030. - Publication of the third “State of the World's Volunteerism Report”, centred on volunteerism and community resilience.
2019	- Launch of UNV synthesis reports on the Plan of Action on integrating volunteering into the 2030 Agenda based on National Situation Analyses which are inputs to the regional stakeholders’ Consultations for the Global Technical Meeting on Volunteering (ongoing at the time this article was written).
2020	- Upcoming “Global Technical Meeting on Volunteering: Reimagining Volunteering” (GTM 2020).

Source: Author’s own work partly adapted from United Nations Volunteers (UNV 2016)

The process that led to the adoption of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs shows that the recognition of volunteers’ roles in sustainable development efforts has been gradually shaping not only academic literature but also advocacy and policy-making discussions in this area. The “ingenuity, solidarity and creativity of millions of people through voluntary action” (UN 2004, p. 3) were part of the premises for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), from 2000 to 2015. **Table 1** highlights global milestones, notably at United Nations level, that showcase connections between volunteering and sustainable development since 2010.

The international momentum towards recognising volunteers’ roles in the sustainable development global agenda is visible between 2012 and 2015, culminating with the adoption of the Agenda 2030 by Heads of State and Government at the United Nations summit for the post-2015 development agenda, in September 2015.

To monitor progress on the Agenda 2030, UN Member States are expected to provide Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) about the implementation of the SDGs at national level. Reviews are public and “aim to facilitate the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned” (UN 2019). From 2016 to 2019, 158 VNRs have been presented by 142 countries, while 15 countries have engaged in more than one occasion. Volunteering has been mentioned in approximately half of the total of VNRs submitted so far, reaching a peak of 63% clear mentions in 2018, as detailed by **Table 2**. In its latest position paper, the stakeholder group representing volunteers at the HLPF recommended that “all Member States include the contribution of volunteers in their Voluntary National Reviews” (Volunteer Groups Alliance 2019).

Table 2. Volunteering in the Voluntary National Reviews

Year of Voluntary National Review (VNR) submission	Number of VNRs submitted	Number of VNRs explicitly mentioning volunteering	% of VNRs mentioning volunteering in relation to total
2016	22	2	9.1%
2017	43	17	39.5%
2018	46	29	63 %
2019	47	25	53.2%
TOTAL	158	73	46.2%

Source: Author’s own work with information from United Nations (2019) and United Nations Volunteers (2018b)

The ‘Voluntary National Reviews Visualisation Tool’ shows keywords in the reports through the use of a methodology in which “bubbles are scaled according to the number of sentences per SDG and the width of the links between SDGs is scaled according to the number of sentences of both SDGs that occur in the same sections” (UNDP; UNDESA; SDG Action Campaign 2019). According to **Figure 1**, volunteering is largely associated with SDG 17 (‘Partnerships for the Goals’), and stronger connections are perceived with SDGs 11 (‘Reduced Inequalities’), 12 (‘Responsible Consumption and Production’) and 16 (‘Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions’). Specific mentions of volunteering in the VNRs reports range from highlighting volunteers’ roles in the overall implementation of SDGs; showcasing volunteering as a tool to strengthen social cohesion in the communities; and providing examples of policies and programmes adopted to support volunteering at the national level.

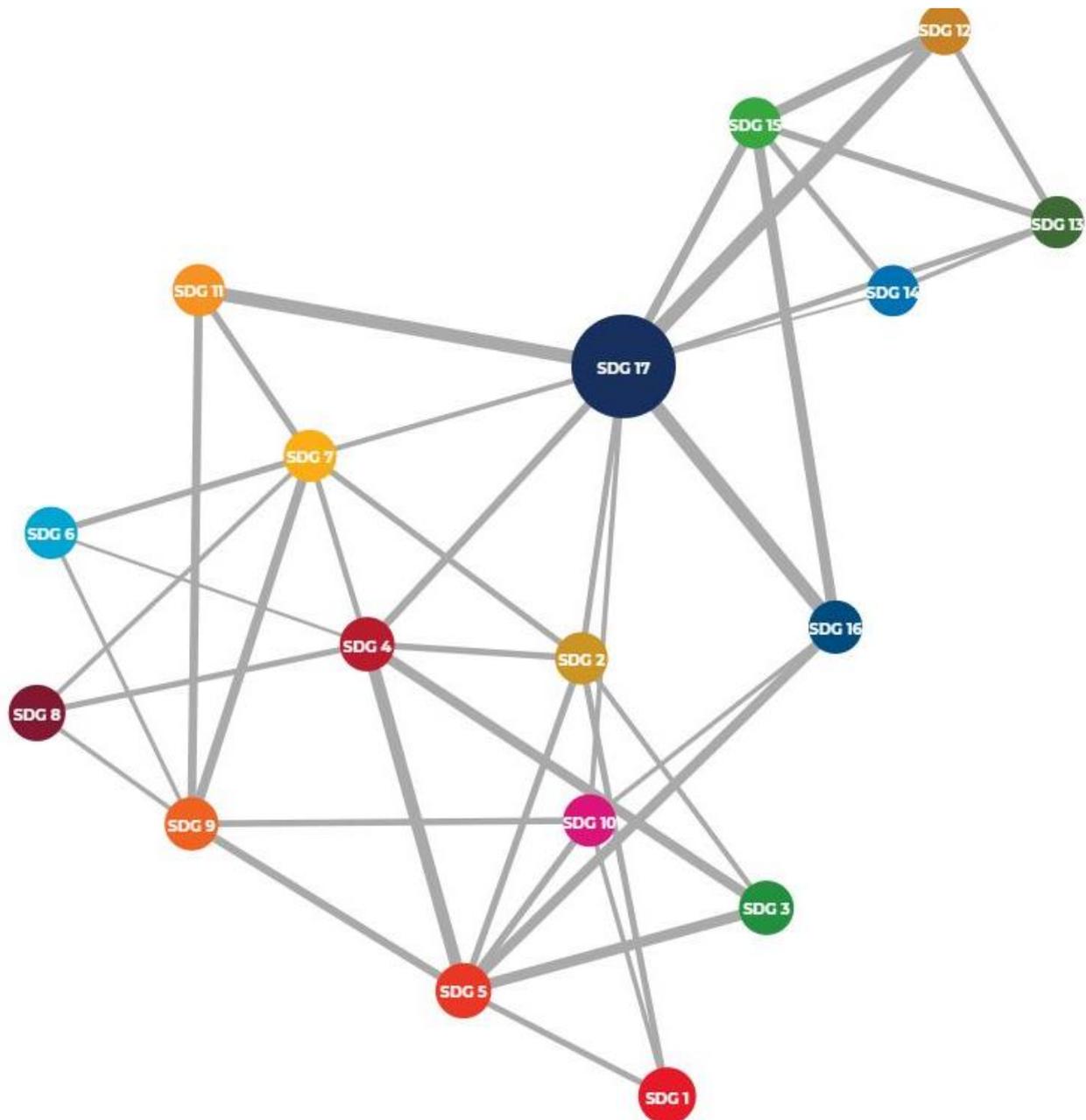


Figure 1. Volunteering and the Sustainable Development Goals

Source: From the Voluntary National Reviews Visualisation Tool, by UNDP, UN DESA, and the SDG Action Campaign ©United Nations 2019. Reprinted with the permission of the United Nations.

The strong connection of volunteering with SDG 17 and volunteers' roles in facilitating the achievement of all goals have been increasingly promoted and celebrated across academic and policy-making spaces. Given the growing emphasis of the SDGs on overcoming silos to promote interlinkages, it is now important to position volunteers beyond implementers of the SDGs to understand how they have been supporting their own community development agendas through leadership embedded in local knowledge and practices.

LOCAL VOLUNTEERS AS VALUABLE ASSETS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The recognition that individuals are already promoting sustainable living within their own contexts is central to connect the global agenda on sustainability to community level. It is the identification of volunteering as a reciprocal act that allows for recognising the “shifting roles between the helpers and those being helped” (Wojno 2011, p. 3). This relational nature of volunteering allows people to see the effects of their work and form bonds, becoming mutually accountable and appreciative of the challenges encountered (Burns et al. 2015, p. 23).

The distinctive contribution of local volunteers to sustainable development is often related to the fact that by “being embedded within communities, volunteers build strong, reciprocal personal and working relationships; volunteers and the people they work alongside have a mutual understanding of each other’s experience, skills and networks and can generate solutions that are locally owned and sustained” (FORUM 2017, p. 2). Hence, volunteers are not detached from the communities but rather an intrinsic part of them, playing leadership roles to mobilise their peers and convert individual initiatives into collective responses.

Volunteering, therefore, represents a space of belonging and agency that brings individuals together and facilitates community engagement. The author’s current doctoral research is looking at the case of Burundi, in East-Central Africa, where local volunteering recognises the neighbour, and not the foreigner, as the main benefactor at community level. Instead of a means of implementation for external agendas, volunteering in Burundi is part of an iterative process of gaining and sustaining trust that must be understood within collective narratives of community relations. The experience of Burundian volunteers is rich in its particular routines across urban and rural settings and in the ways these are embedded in local traditions and culture. Local volunteers in Burundi are numerous; the capacities of the Burundi Red Cross National Society, for example, have been scaled up through the protagonism of hundreds of thousands of local volunteers in the last decade (IFRC 2012, p. 24).

In this debate, efforts of measuring volunteering usually seek to place the practice into context and showcase its dimensions in national or global scales. In Australia, for example, national figures calculate the annual economic and social contribution made by volunteers in \$290 billion, with Australians having volunteered for approximately 932 million hours in 2016 (Australian Government 2017). At global level, the economic value of volunteering has been estimated as equivalent to 109 million full-time workers (UNV 2018a). However, these figures rely on estimations and statistical models that are not without limitations. Global quantitative attempts to standardise volunteering are necessarily restricted to allow for higher degrees of comparability. Dominant views often derive from particular Western understandings of the economic value of labour and figures tend to “provide only the value of volunteering in terms of the worth to the organisation of the volunteers’ time” (Rochester et al. 2010, p. 168). Beyond economic aspects, the value of volunteering for community development needs to be understood in all its complexity, adapted to socioeconomic and cultural particularities of each context. In terms of social cohesion and quality of life, volunteering might play overt or tacit roles in building trustful relationships and promoting social solidarity amongst community members.

Qualitative aspects, therefore, must be taken into consideration, especially when the majority of global volunteering activity is performed informally (UNV 2018a). The United Nations understands that “the added value of volunteerism extends far beyond the numbers of people participating in development initiatives; value systems in any society have a major influence on the direction and performance of development efforts [and] civic engagement through voluntary action is one of the principal manifestations of trust and solidarity within and among communities” (2004, p. 3). Where formal

volunteering is concerned, volunteering-involving organisations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement recognise that they would not be able to succeed without the support of wide volunteer networks (IFRC 2011b). In turn, organisations offer connection points through which volunteers come together to advance their interests and strengthen local action and social cohesion, mobilising for the development of their communities and encouraging new forms of collaboration (Burns et al. 2015; Perold and Graham 2017). At individual level, personal outcomes such as recognition from the community, learning and belonging are essentially subjective aspects arising from the volunteering experiences.

Finally, whereas the positive impact promoted by local volunteers in development efforts is celebrated, existing concerns involve “the extent to which [they] deliver services in the face of the state failing to meet the essential needs of its citizens and placing additional burdens on already stretched and vulnerable communities” (Perold and Graham 2017, p. 125). There is thus a risk of local volunteers’ efforts being appropriated by neoliberal agendas, and portrayed as a cheap form of delivering essential services at community level, especially in contexts marked by economic disruption. To allow for sustainable volunteering, governments and relevant stakeholders must care for the conditions in which local volunteers act, so that they perform their roles as auxiliaries and not substitutes to public services. Key elements in this regard involve the development of appropriate risk management tools and the establishment of systems that look after volunteers’ safety, security and well-being, such as promoting appropriate legal frameworks, psychosocial support, insurance and safety nets.

CONCLUSION

This article presented perspectives from academics and practitioners to analyse volunteering in the sustainable development agenda. We look at volunteering as a relational practice and context-specific driver of community development. Beyond implementers of the SDGs, we argue that local volunteers’ agency and leadership shape community development according to their own needs and priorities. By questioning common assumptions we recognise multiple layers of complexity within local communities. The diversity of volunteers’ experiences contrast with the limitations of quantitative measurement tools that do not fully capture the value of their community involvement. Despite the increasing recognition of volunteers as uniquely positioned to promote sustainable development, further qualitative research remains necessary to actively listen to local volunteers, notably in the global South. Only by learning from their experiences at community level and including their voices in decision-making processes we will be fully equipped to advance the global agenda on sustainability.

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[Revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development through Community Engagement](#)

[Supporting the Sustainable Development Goals through Partnerships and Local Development](#)

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