Mobilising for a socially just, equitable and sustainable world

Strategic Plan 2017-2021

Comhlámh - development workers and volunteers in global solidarity: Ireland
Áine Lynch, Kate O’Donnell, Miren Samper, Ellen Doneley and Emer Kerrigan fundraising at the women’s mini-marathon.

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Lilla Watson, Aboriginal elder, activist and educator, Australia
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1. Comhlámh and the Sustainable Development Goals

Comhlámh - development workers and volunteers in global solidarity, Ireland. Comhlámh is an all-island, independent, not-for-profit, association of members that operates out of a community development model.

With over 40 years of experience, Comhlámh supports people through their journey in international development work, both as development workers and volunteers.

Comhlámh’s strategic plan 2012-2016 positioned the association as the leading voice on volunteering and action for development. This period, which included a major restructuring, has also been a period of renewal with a successful ‘Back to our Roots’ campaign.

Comhlámh made significant progress across all of its stated objectives including being the leading voice and source of information on volunteering; coordinating good practice in volunteering; supporting critical engagement in volunteering and action for development and finally membership development.

In 2015, the international community adopted a set of 17
The SDGs identify the central role to be played by volunteers in reaching these universal goals.

The SDGs identify the central role to be played by volunteers in reaching these universal goals. Irish people have a long history of working in solidarity in countries of the Global South. Development workers and volunteers are drawn from a huge range of professions and age groups, and their experience of realities in the Global South helps them to make a unique contribution to action for global justice.

Volunteering plays a key role in strengthening civic engagement, promoting social inclusion, deepening solidarity, building resilience in the face of multiple humanitarian challenges and ensuring widespread participation in development.

Comhlámh believes that for the SDGs to be realised, there is a greater need than ever before for ordinary citizens and people’s organisations to become critically involved in the thought-spaces needed to plot a new future by testing out alternative models of development and ways of living.
“..volunteering, yes, but, for what type of development - not the type of development underway as we will need four planets if everyone lives the way we do in Europe.”

Richard Dictus – Executive Director, United Nations Volunteers Programme at IVCO 2016, Bonn.

2. How we see the world

2.1 Global Development Paradigms

The gap between rich and poor continues to widen at national, regional and global levels. The discourse on progress achieved through the Millennium Development Goals masks stark realities regarding progress on poverty levels.

Almost 1.3 billion of the global population of 6.9 billion live in ‘extreme poverty’, i.e. defined as living on less than US$1.25 a day. Those deemed to be living in ‘poverty’, defined as living on less than US$2 a day - number 4.9 billion. That’s 71% of the world’s population living in ‘poverty’.

Under the guise of the so-called ‘Washington consensus’, the neo-liberal model of development has seen a greatly reduced role for the state in advancing development objectives. The dominant paradigm has promoted a radical liberalisation agenda, with aggressive deregulation of the market and privatisation of public services. Under the guise of free trade, a narrative Comhlámh has actively resisted, agreements have been imposed on countries of the Global South that have served to undermine the sovereign rights of these countries to decide their own development paths. Instead of states working to progressively realise the human rights of their citizens in line with their international human rights obligations, such rights have
been subordinated to the needs of capital and abstract ‘growth’ rather than people.

The global financial crisis, the emerging impacts of climate change and related complex humanitarian emergencies, rising inequality, the endless arms race and the ‘war on terror’, forced global migration and the rise of xenophobia are all pointers to a deeply flawed model of development. There is a need for alternative models to be brought forward that can bring about a just society, locally and globally, without compromising the sustainable future of the coming generations. An historic realignment is needed. Never before has there been such a need for communities, ordinary citizens and people’s organisations to occupy the critical thought-spaces to discern a new future, and to test alternative models and ways of being. All this with a view to creating a sustainable, equitable, and just society, locally and globally.

The adoption of the SDGs recognises the interconnected nature of our global world, which necessitates the tackling of poverty and exclusion in all its forms, everywhere. The Paris Climate Agreement also points to a growing global consensus to tackle the shared problems that climate change will bring. There are new shoots in terms of thinking and alliance building. Much of this is coming from the Global South. Southern-led alliances such as CIVICUS and the Futures Commission are leading on advocacy about the place of civil society and the alternative policy frameworks needed for a just economy.

In the Global North, the work of the Equality Trust is highlighting the link between inequality and poor development outcomes. Globally, the Basic Income Earth Network is pioneering work on a universal basic income (UBI). More broadly, there is a growing acceptance of the need to create a fossil-free economy and to challenge the orthodox perspectives on limitless growth. All these and many other initiatives are underway which are looking at not only new policy models but also new ways of communities organising to build more sustainable and resilient societies.
2.2 The Space for Civil Society

With the 8 richest people, all men, owning as much wealth as the bottom 3.6 billion of humanity there are now such huge inequalities in wealth and power that the possibility of an integral development coming about are seriously in question.

The extent of such globalisation has created further difficulties for ordinary people to hold their governments to account, as the institutions of governance remain state centred but power has shifted to global corporations outside of the control and oversight of nation states. Nowhere is this more evident than in the inability of Ireland to effectively tax multi-national corporations working here. The extent of global inequalities we are living through require a renewed focus on the role of civil society to hold governments and the corporate sector to account.

Development at the most fundamental level involves the redistribution of power among members of society. For there to be development, there needs to be good governance, and this more than anything requires an active, dynamic civil society. For power to be redistributed there needs to be a greater participation of ordinary citizens in all spheres of life. Against this backdrop, there has been a closing of space for civil society, with increasing restrictions on freedom of association and freedom of expression. UN rapporteurs have highlighted the negative impacts of the closing of civic space, with restrictions on access to funding, limits to the rights of civil society to engage in advocacy and lobbying of duty bearers. Coupled with this is the increasing tendency by government to subcontract the voluntary sector to deliver on programmes of work that limits the autonomy and ability of civil society to question the direction that policies and programmes are going in.

Civil society encompasses all those actors outside of the state and the private sector. It takes in a broad range of actors from community based self-help groups, formal NGOs based locally and internationally, faith-based groups, the media and social movements. Comhlámh plays a key role in civil society in Ireland. The work of civil society covers a range of work from providing supports to one's own community, to innovating and providing services to marginalised communities while at the same time supporting communities to tackle the root causes of poverty and injustice. Such activities are complementary.

2.3 The Role of Volunteering for Development

For civil society to flourish and thrive, an enabling environment, for those who wish to volunteer, is key. In this regard, the recognition given to the place of civil society and volunteering organisations, in achieving the SDGs, is positive. The work of volunteers and volunteering was the subject of the 2015 UN Secretary General’s report on volunteering, which aims to strengthen people’s ownership of the development agenda, through enhanced civic engagement and an enabling environment for civic action.

Comhlámh believes that for the post-2015 sustainable development agenda to succeed, improving governance, tackling inequalities, and expanding voice and participation are intrinsically linked. In this regard, Comhlámh believes that volunteering and social activism are also intrinsically linked, which is echoed in the United Nations Volunteers ‘State of the World’s Volunteerism Report – Transforming Governance (2015)’. There is a continuum of action from engaging in voluntary activities that provide services to communities (whether one's own or others) through to making governments worldwide more accountable and responsive to their citizens. Volunteerism provides a key channel for engagement from the local through to the national and global contexts. The universality of the SDGs highlights the interconnectedness of our globalised world: the need to work for justice and equality is as needed in the Global South as it is here in Ireland.

The historical evolution of international volunteering has been inextricably linked to patterns and models of development of the last half century of development cooperation. This
changing context of volunteering has been the subject of much work by Comhlámh going back to the mid-late 1990’s, from which the origins of the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice for volunteer sending agencies can be traced. Responsible volunteering practices today have contributed to a significant shifting of volunteering programmes away from a ‘saviour’ mentality to one of partnership, capacity building, skills sharing and building relationships through reciprocity, intercultural learning and exchange. This shifting emphasis comes at a time of increasing focus on shorter-term placements along with greater numbers of under-25s taking part. All of this highlights the need to ensure that the continued engagement of returned volunteers, once back in their home countries, is actively promoted as a core part of the volunteering journey. Our research shows that of the 2,000 who volunteer each year, approximately 40% of these are students.

Comhlámh’s work on responsible volunteering provides a counter-point to the volunteer experience as a commodity to be provided by the market. The neo-liberal commodification of the volunteer experience, often referred to as ‘volontourism’, provides a platform for the ‘better off’ to provide aid to the ‘worse off’, thus reinforcing the existing power dynamics and pre-existing negative stereotypes.

The preconceived assumptions within modernisation thinking, i.e. that ‘we’ in the Global North are developed and that ‘they’ in the Global South are underdeveloped or developing, are deeply harmful. Such thinking presents blocks to a deeper engagement by the wider public, development workers, and volunteers with the need for building a culture of solidarity, mutual respect and partnership within development programmes. There are positive evolutions in models and practice in international volunteering with the traditional North-South trajectory of volunteers joined by South-South and South-North programmes. These latter developments highlight growing global interdependency and the universal nature of the SDGs.

‘The specific aims of the Volunteering Initiative are to strengthen support for volunteering at each stage of the volunteering process – from the information stage to the volunteer’s return’.

– Irish Aid Volunteering Initiative
3. What we believe

3.1 Values

We are motivated by the following values.

Critical voice

More than ever, a critical voice is needed to challenge the stereotypes of the Global South and to question the dominant narratives of our time. We aim to be a critically reflective voice, speaking out on areas where we have experience and insights informed from experiential learning and partnerships with civil society in the Global South. We don’t have all the answers so we actively encourage people to question.

Authenticity / integrity

Society is crying out for integrity from all our institutions, whether public, private sector, not-for-profit or faith-based. We strongly believe in what we do: we work with conviction, in a manner that is open, honest and inclusive in our dealings with our partners and stakeholders. We aim to ensure what we do is in keeping with our values.

Social Justice

We strongly believe that the current economic model is unjust, oppressive and exclusionary and needs radical change. We commit ourselves to work for social justice where there is greater fairness in terms of outcomes in society, with a genuine respect for diversity and greater popular participation in decision-making.

Equality

We believe that all are equal, but require differing supports to ensure effective participation in all aspects of society.

Activism / empowerment

Society needs a critically engaged citizenry. We believe that we all have a voice and that with skillful facilitation and support, people can be helped to take action on the world about them. An active citizenry needs time for conscientization but also the skills and experiences of taking action. Through our rootedness in development education practice, we facilitate the agency of our members and the wider community of volunteers and development workers in our sector.
Diversity

We value the diversity of opinions and perspectives in all the working groups and membership groups we operate through: we believe in working slowly to ensure that all are heard and that decisions taken respect the views of all. We will work in the coming years to ensure that perspectives from migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from the Global South inform our perspectives.

Independence

Civil society is under increasing pressures to demonstrate its legitimacy as a separate and independent space of reflection and action. Comhlámh provides such an independent space for reflection, discussion and action on any areas of work that members choose to engage with.

Nurturing

We have seen too many committed volunteers and development workers 'burn out': we are committed to supporting members and those we work with, with the skills and practices that will sustain them in their work.

Legitimacy (credibility)

At a time of great questioning of the legitimacy and credibility of not-for-profit organisations, we re-commit ourselves to the highest standards of governance, operating out of a culture of maximum transparency and openness and of being engaged with all relevant codes of practice on governance.

Sustainability

The current fossil fuel economy and the pursuit of endless growth are not sustainable: there is a need for a dramatic reduction in consumption in the Global North to prevent runaway damage occurring from climate change. We are committed to acting in ways that are congruent with this.

1. Conscientization focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, reaching new levels of awareness of oppression and becoming part of the process of changing the world.
4. How we work - our communities of engagement

There are various layers to the way Comhlámh works and operates.

4.1 What is Comhlámh?

Comhlámh is the association of those of the international development sector; those people who have or continue to work in the Global South or in Ireland as volunteers (with the various Volunteer Sending Agencies) or salaried development workers (with for example the various Dóchas agencies, Irish Aid and others). The association supports those people whether in or out of paid membership.

4.2 Our Membership and Member Groups

Membership of the association is secured through the payment of an annual subscription:

- Those within the international development/humanitarian sector;
- Members of migrant communities and refugees, allowing them to connect with others who know something of their reality and to have an outlet to work for global justice;
- Those who have not worked/lived in the Global South but who are working for development in Ireland from a global justice perspective.

Comhlámh members inspire the continued direction of the association. Experienced development workers and volunteers get to bring their own particular experiences of international cooperation work and to channel these experiences as part of Comhlámh membership groups (organised on a regional or thematic basis). These make a unique contribution to the Irish development sector. The membership provides overall direction to the association through the Annual General Meeting at which the board of directors are elected.
4.3 Potential Volunteers

Comhlámh reaches out to the wider public, to constituencies of people who are interested or thinking of getting involved in international volunteering. We support people interested in volunteering to think critically about their motivations for volunteering and the role and purpose of volunteering. We act as a hub of information and sign-posting to responsible volunteering practice.

4.4 The Signatories to the Code of Good Practice

Comhlámh, through its Code of Good Practice (CoGP) for Volunteer Sending Agencies (VSAs), works with the staff of over 40 Irish organisations who are Code signatories. We support their practice on responsible volunteering, through the various mechanisms and components of the Code including extensive capacity building across all areas of the management of volunteers in international development. The origins of the Code are within the Comhlámh Options and Issues member group. It has been developed and continues to be renewed through an active participation by the VSAs with an active working group (Volunteering Options Working Group) drawn from Code signatories and independent volunteering voices.

4.5 The Supporters of the Code of Good Practice

Comhlámh has created a Supporter Network for the Code of Good Practice. These organisations do not send volunteers but have an interest in supporting good practice in international volunteering. This network reaches out to third level institutions, trade unions, professional bodies and others. This affiliation will ensure that a wide range of the Irish public will be aware of our perspectives on responsible volunteering and the work of Code Signatories.
4.6 Comhlámh as a Hub of Activism on Development

Comhlámh has, through its ‘open-house’ approach, facilitated over 70 different groups to meet, work and organise out of our office over the last number of years. These groups include volunteer sending agencies, country solidarity groups, development/humanitarian NGOs, migrant and refugee groups and a range of local-global activist groups. Some of these also use Comhlámh as their registered address for postal services. All of these groups share similar values and overall aims of Comhlámh in working for global justice. We promote their work and encourage those returning from working in the Global South to get involved in these groups, according to their particular interests.

4.7 Our Solidarity Partners

Comhlámh’s Solidarity Partners are made up of a great range of organisations in and around the international development sector. These partners share values and contribute to support and inform the wider direction of the association. These organisations provide a financial contribution to Comhlámh in recognition of the value that Comhlámh brings to the wider development sector through its forming and nurturing of those active in volunteering for development work.

4.8. Networks We Belong to and Support

Comhlámh belongs to various networks both in Ireland and internationally. These arrangements vary from formal paid memberships of networks to participation in informal coalitions active on various themes. These networks allow our work to be amplified as we contribute to the thinking and practice of wider networks. They also keep us abreast of developments and allow us to contribute our voice.
5. What we do

5.1 Vision

Our vision is of development workers and volunteers working in solidarity for a socially just, equitable and sustainable world, locally and globally.

5.2 Mission

Our mission is to nurture, guide and mobilise development workers and volunteers to work for social justice locally and globally.

5.3 Objectives

Objective 1 - Inform

We will work to promote international volunteering that strengthens the public’s ownership of the development agenda and builds awareness of the necessity of tackling poverty and exclusion in all their forms.

Key Initiatives

- Raise awareness of the potential of responsible, responsive volunteering to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs;

- Engage with sectors of the public who are considering international volunteering to ensure they are fully informed about good practice in volunteering and can place their volunteering experiences within the wider context of global development;

- Utilise the stories and testimonials of returned volunteers and development workers to deepen public understanding of the development agenda;

- Develop the Code of Good Practice ‘Supporter Network’ across organisations in the Republic and Northern Ireland which will act as multipliers of our messaging on responsible, responsive volunteering;

- Continue to develop and grow our online presence through innovative social media campaigns, reaching out to targeted online communities;

- Host key public debates and workshops on various development topics including the ‘First Wednesday Debates’ as a way to connect local and global development issues.
Expected impact

- Comhlámh is recognised in Ireland as the leading voice on good practice in international volunteering;

- Various online communities have access to critical resources on responsible volunteering, allowing them to make informed choices about getting involved in volunteering.

Objective 2 - Educate

We will provide training and education that support good practice in international development work and volunteering.

Key Initiatives

- Develop innovative on-line courses to deliver pre-decision and pre-departure training programmes, including through collaboration with EU partner organisations;

- Provide comprehensive pre-departure and post-return training for individuals and groups working and volunteering in the Global South;

- Build the capacity of sending organisations to deliver pre-departure and post-return training, including through collaboration with EU partners and partners from host organisations in the Global South;

- Develop new partnerships with third-level placement programmes (e.g. medical electives) to ensure those involved can situate their placement within the wider context of global development;

- Strengthen and grow post-return development education courses that support the continued engagement of volunteers in action for development.

Expected impact

- We are recognised both nationally and internationally as expert providers of training and education for volunteers and development workers;

- Our work with professional placement programmes influences and mainstreams good practice in how placements are set up and conducted;

- Volunteers and development workers are equipped with the skills to continue their action for development when they come back from the Global South.
Objective 3 - Support

We will lead the ongoing development and implementation of good practice standards for volunteer sending agencies (VSAs), to ensure responsible, responsive volunteering at all stages of the volunteer continuum.

Key Initiatives

- Continuously reflect on and develop the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies, to include good practice identified by VSAs in Ireland, as well as international practice;

- Manage a robust Code audit process that supports the demonstration of good practice by Code signatories;

- Support organisations to improve their practice through continual progression in relation to Code compliance;

- Engage with emerging VSAs to ensure that they are aware of the Code and supported to become signatories;

- Coordinate training, capacity building, mentoring, and peer support for VSA staff in their learning and development on all aspects of responsible volunteering for development;

- Grow the common voice of Code signatories to promote the role of volunteerism in the achievement of the SDGs.

Expected impact

- The Comhlámh Code of Good Practice supports and leads Irish VSAs to implement responsible, responsive volunteering that places host communities at the heart of practice;

- Tangible improvements are made to Code signatory agencies’ policy and practice, with growing numbers of signatories achieving Core Compliance and Comprehensive Compliance status.
As the Irish Association of Volunteers and Development Workers, our vision is of volunteers and development workers working in solidarity for a just, equitable and sustainable world.

We work to promote responsible, responsive international volunteering.

Check out the Supports and Services section of our website www.comhlamh.org

A poster outlining our support services for overseas volunteers and development workers.
Objective 4 - Nurture

We will provide a supportive environment for those we work with to help sustain them in their work.

Key Initiatives

- Build capacity of VSAs to support their volunteers into active citizenship when they return from a placement;
- Engage with relevant organisations from around the EU to learn from their practice with returnees, and to share knowledge from Ireland;
- Identify and work with new groups of volunteers and development workers who are mobilising to address humanitarian issues emerging within the EU;
- Protect the social insurance and public service pension rights of volunteers and volunteer development workers;
- A range of supports including debriefing, critical incident debriefing, counselling and career services are sign-posted or provided to returned volunteers and development workers post placement.

Expected impact

- Comhlámh services are promoted and accessible to all returned development workers and volunteers;
- Comhlámh responds to emerging needs in a rapidly changing sector and provides innovative responses to needs, as they arise.
Objective 5 - Innovate

We will contribute to and lead the development of research, policy and practice on volunteering for international development, which will inform our advocacy work.

Key Initiatives

- Collate an annual statistical overview of international volunteering from Ireland that provides a profile of volunteers’ work and identifies key emerging trends;
- Coordinate Irish VSAs to promote the role of volunteers in achieving the SDGs;
- Actively participate in the Forum network, sharing and learning on good practice in international volunteering for development;
- Contribute to the development and evolution of pan-EU initiatives such as the European Solidarity Corps and the EU Aid Volunteers Initiative, including through advocacy work with international partners;
- Collate practice on the role of volunteering in humanitarian contexts, and advocate for standards of good practice in humanitarian volunteering within the EU.

Expected impact

- Comhláth is seen as the leading independent voice and source of information on volunteering for development and humanitarian work from Ireland;
- Comhláth coordinates common responses and position papers that assist Irish VSAs to advocate for the role of international volunteering in achieving the SDGs.
Objective 6 - Activate

We will provide a dynamic space for our membership to take action for change on a range of global justice issues.

Key Initiatives

- Inspire returned development workers and volunteers to join Comhlámh and become active in the association;
- Support and facilitate member groups throughout the island of Ireland to progress their work on global justice issues;
- Improve the range of supports and secure budgets for Comhlámh’s membership groups to undertake the production of publications and resources, and deliver development education courses and advocacy initiatives;
- Organise social gatherings for members in Belfast, Dublin and other locations, as opportunities arise;
- Host the ‘Solidarity’ meeting space for development/country solidarity agencies active across a range of global justice themes;
- Work to build links between our members’ activism and those working in Ireland on social justice issues.

Expected impact

- Membership groups are raising awareness and engaging in development education and advocacy on a range of global justice issues;
- Comhlámh is seen as a leading space within which people from the international development/humanitarian sector can come together and organise around issues of concern.
Current membership groups

- Focus Magazine
- The Belfast Group
- The Dympna Meaney Fund
- Palestine & Israel Development Education Group
- The Trade Justice Group
- Ireland Says Welcome
Comhlámh is a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital. Comhlámh is a registered charity.

Comhlámh is governed by a voluntary board, which is elected at the Annual General Meetings of the association. The board ensures good corporate governance and provides leadership, strategic direction and oversight to ensure alignment with the organisation’s vision, mission and values. It meets a minimum of five times per annum and operates a number of board sub-committees to deliver its work. The board oversees the work of the Head of Comhlámh who in turn leads the day to day management of the staff.

Comhlámh membership groups are supported by staff and are ultimately answerable to the board, as provided in the Memorandum and Articles of Association.

The Comhlámh Code of Good Practice is the intellectual property of Comhlámh: its management and oversight are led by Comhlámh. The Volunteering Options Working Group is drawn from representatives of the Code of Good Practice signatories, independent volunteers and Comhlámh staff: it acts as an expert reference group that ensures the development and evolution of the Code.

We acknowledge the core funding we receive from Irish Aid through the Irish Aid Volunteering Initiative. We are keen, in the 2017-2021 period to leverage off this funding and further diversify our funding through seeking out new avenues of funding outside of Ireland. Given the greater challenges of accessing EU Development Education funding arising from the concentration amongst a small number of very large consortia, we will continue to explore other avenues of EU funding, in particular Erasmus+ and the EU Aid Volunteering Initiative. During this strategic plan period we will work to grow our own unrestricted funding through an active fundraising programme and grow our network of individual donors and Solidarity Partnerships.

Comhlámh is committed to the highest standards of accountability to the many funders of the association and commits to effective and efficient stewardship of the funding received via programme and project grants, membership subscriptions, committed giving and donations. Comhlámh is signed up to all relevant governance codes for the community and voluntary sector, in particular the NGO Code of Corporate Governance and the Dóchas Code on Images & Messages. We will ensure Comhlámh’s governance and accountability processes are fit for purpose, in keeping with and moving beyond best practice.
Walk with us

Help us to discover our own riches,
Don’t judge us poor because we lack what
you have.
Help us to discover our chains.
Don’t judge us slaves by the type of shackles
you wear.
Be patient with us as a people.
Don’t judge us backward because we don’t
follow your way.
Be patient with our pace.
Don’t judge us lazy because we don’t follow
your tempo.
Be patient with our symbols.
Don’t judge us ignorant because we don’t
read your signs.
Be with us
And be open to what we can give.
Be with us as a companion who walks with
us.
Neither behind nor in front
In our common journey.

- Bienvenido S. Tadtud,
Bishop of Marawi,
Philippines
Comhláthm acknowledges the support of Irish Aid funding in the development of this strategic plan. The contents of this plan can in no way be taken to reflect the official position of Irish Aid.