

IVCO
NEWCASTLE 2024

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**IVCO 2024
CONFERENCE REPORT**

**BUILDING AND SUSTAINING
CONNECTIONS FOR CHANGE:
VOLUNTEERING FOR
SOLIDARITY**



**Northumbria
University
NEWCASTLE**



**Centre
for Global
Development**



Comhlámh
GLOBAL SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

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Introduction

The 2024 edition of the Forum's Annual Conference of International Volunteer Cooperation Organisations (IVCO 2024) took place at a time of interconnected crises, conflicts and particular upheavals around the world. Individuals and communities worldwide are facing unprecedented economic, environmental, technological and social challenges. Now, more than ever, volunteer-involving organisations and stakeholders need to find ways to reinforce solidarity and forge deeper connections to advance equity, social justice, and sustainability across diverse national and international contexts affected by widening inequalities.

Northumbria University's Centre for Global Development, in collaboration with Comhlámh, the Irish Association of Development Workers and Volunteers, and the International Forum for Volunteering in Development (Forum) hosted IVCO 2024 from 9th to 13th September at Northumbria University's City Campus in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. For the first time, the IVCO Conference was hosted by an academic institution. This reflects the importance of cross-sectoral dialogue in achieving change and is an example of collaboration rooted in social justice to promote effective volunteering practice and research.

Global leaders in the volunteering in development sector, including representatives from international organisations, Non-Governmental Organisations, research centres and government institutions based in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas, as well as local practitioners from the North East of England came together to explore the theme **'Building and Sustaining Connections for Change: Volunteering for Solidarity'**.



This theme emphasised the importance of partnerships and solidarity in addressing the challenges of an increasingly unequal world, characterised by division and protracted crises, while highlighting the multiple roles of volunteers in driving change and the challenges they face.

The programme was tailored to be participatory and to amplify diverse voices. Through interactive sessions and peer-to-peer exchanges, the conference days were structured as a learning journey encompassing active experimentation and doing, as well as analysing and thinking. For this, in addition to interactive group activities during the plenary sessions, the conference used a range of four formats for breakout sessions: 'How-to' workshops, Human Library Sessions, Strategy Conversations and Pecha-Kucha Sessions.



The three days of the conference each explored a distinct perspective on the overarching theme, and this report is organised around these thematic areas:

1. Crises of Today and Crises of Tomorrow

Exploring volunteering and the roles and challenges of volunteers in relation to historical, contemporary, and future global crises.

2. Exploring Relationships for Solidarities in Times of Crises

Examining relationships in volunteering, whether they are fit for purpose and how we might strengthen them to shape more sustainable ways of working.

3. Embarking on a Collective Journey of Volunteering for Transformative Change

Sharing existing practices and exploring new approaches to relationships that can enhance the impact of volunteering and strengthen capacities to navigate crises.

Each thematic section of this report presents selected feedback from the breakout sessions, reflecting the diversity of session formats that inspired discussion among delegates. Each section also concludes with a set of thought-provoking questions for organisations working with volunteers, aimed at inspiring ongoing efforts to foster solidarities and drive transformative change.

1. Crises of Today and Crises of Tomorrow

***'...the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis. You see, our responses and the troubles they are directed towards are co-constitutive aspects of each other.'* – Bayo Akomolafe**

Aim

Day 1 framed where volunteering sits in relation to historical, contemporary, and future global crises. We collectively explored the depth of the crises and what they mean for volunteering and development and for the work of volunteer-involving organisations. The aim was to:

- *Identify intersecting global crises and how they impact, influence and/or shape volunteering and development work.*
- *Share experiences on the roles of volunteering in addressing contemporary global socioeconomic, environmental and technological challenges in different contexts.*
- *Promote 'questioning' instead of solutioning as an effective approach to understanding and tackling prevailing challenges faced by volunteer-involving organisations.*

Context

As the world is confronted by myriad challenges, it is essential to identify the most imminent or already unfolding threats that require immediate responses without losing sight of the urgency of all crises. We need to ask ourselves what are the most urgent global crises we are currently facing, how do they intersect, and why are they relevant for volunteering and development. It becomes increasingly apparent that COVID-19 has served as a precursor to the types of systemic shocks we anticipate in the future, as the climate emergency and other severe disruptions to our lives and livelihoods become more prevalent. Hence, it is ever more pressing to reflect on the position of volunteering in relation to past, present and future crises and the potential it has to address them.



The multifaceted nature of current (and likely future) crises requires individuals and organisations to deal with the often overlapping and protracted impacts of conflict, displacement and the climate emergency, as well as the compounding effects of health, housing, and financial crises. The speed and depth of these events also call for us to consider how our ways of working affect or contribute to such crises.

The history of the international volunteering sector is deeply connected with and shaped by colonialism, and often continues to be characterised by power imbalances that contribute to replicating the conditions in which injustice can thrive. In recent years, the volunteering and development sector has begun to explore unsettling and uncomfortable questions around how (neo)colonialism, saviourism, and ethnocentrism have shaped and continue to shape international volunteering. These critical discussions and reflections can help us, individually and collectively, to consider the ways in which historic power imbalances continue impact our relationships. Rather than focusing on and rushing to solutions IVCO conference delegates were invited to foreground inquiry-based approaches to understanding the challenges that volunteer-involving organisations are facing and consider if they are contributing to those challenges rather than helping meet them.



Highlights from the discussions

During the plenary session, delegates reflected on past, present, and anticipated global crises and examined the role of volunteering in relation to these challenges. Participants were encouraged to consider the concepts of connection and solidarity within this context. There was an exploration the importance of solidarity-based relationships and the need to question and test the authenticity of collaborations.

Listening emerged as a fundamental pillar of building solidarity, alongside recognising the importance of language in fostering understanding. Reciprocity, openness, and mutual learning were identified as essential to finding common ground and cultivating trust. However, care must be taken to avoid fostering a false sense of unity. True unity arises from acknowledging, understanding, and celebrating differences rather than attempting to homogenise diversity. Central to building solidarity is the need to confront interlinked systems of oppression such as coloniality, racism, and classism. Developing solidarity-based relationships requires courage, creativity, and reflexivity, as well as significant investment of time and effort. We are however not starting from scratch, and we should celebrate and build on work already done to create solidarity. It was recognised that the landscape of crises has changed in recent years, with an increase in systemic issues such as climate change that transcend borders, while at the same time borders are becoming more tightly controlled. In parallel, perceptions of volunteering are changing, with some seeing it as less feasible or less valuable, leading to a decline in engagement as an increasingly important challenge.

The **'How-to' Workshop** focused on the value of reflection when facing the challenges of global crises. Comhlámh shared its Code of Good Practice for Collaborative Working and Peer Support. The Code has been developed over 20 years and is regularly reviewed in collaboration with partners and local communities. At the heart of the code are place-based values that unite international volunteers and stakeholders. The values of solidarity, social justice, environmental sustainability, respect and integrity form the pillars of the Code. An important guiding principle for the organisation in times of crisis is "The times are urgent – let us slow down" (Bayo Akomolafe). There was a discussion on the implementation and management of the Code of Conduct and on supporting volunteers to cope with additional demands. The workshop also included a presentation by France Volontaires and the National Agency for Volunteerism in Togo on the impact of reciprocity and international exchange in solidarity volunteering. This focused on using the concept of reciprocity to build cooperation and partnerships between Togo and France, with exchanges of volunteers between the two regions. There was a strong emphasis on long-term volunteering supported by a framework of reciprocity, focusing on ethical, formative and transformative dimensions.

Overall, reciprocity in international volunteering was perceived as a concept with significant positive impacts, although challenges were also discussed. Volunteers return to their communities with new skills and socio-professional capacities, and this was illustrated by detailed examples of volunteers from Togo. The discussion focused on the concept of reciprocity and how it is understood differently in different contexts (e.g. between the global South and the global North), and how this understanding can be used to address the challenges, mainly logistical, of promoting volunteering between countries.

The **Strategy Conversation** focused on building bridges and solidarity between North-South volunteering opportunities. Norec talked about building bridges through North-South and South-North volunteering, and France Volontaires focused on solidarity as a framework that is a crucial lever in global crises. It fosters deep connections and is transformative, a two-way exchange that benefits both sides. This was followed by a presentation from IAVE on their recent research on global volunteering, focusing on three themes: 'who are volunteers', 'volunteering for systems change' and 'from me to us'. The presentation referenced the current decline in the number of volunteers worldwide, the diversity of volunteer roles, the fact that some do not identify themselves as volunteers, the benefits of volunteering and the recognition that some will only volunteer if it benefits them, but that this is reasonable. The discussion that followed focused largely on youth exchanges and the impact of building bridges in a complex world. Partnerships and bridges exist even when volunteering is not taking place. A discussion on the impact of volunteering suggested that time is not necessarily the only important thing to consider and that one opportunity often leads to many others.

There is a need for authenticity when engaging with local people in crisis. It is important to help build resilience, as these are the people who will be there when the next crisis hits. The general discussion highlighted the need for reciprocity of volunteers in many directions: North-South, South-North and especially South-South, but always emphasising the centrality of knowledge and skills sharing in all directions.

The **Human Library** session began by focusing on the socio-cultural and religious contexts of volunteering in Pacific communities and how Pacific peoples engage in volunteering. The discussion also touched on cultural obligations, highlighting the link between volunteering, belonging and identity within these communities, and challenging the Western notion of volunteering. This was followed by a presentation focusing on the safety and well-being of volunteers. It provided an overview of the 13 standards for the safety, security and wellbeing of volunteers in the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, highlighting the importance of risk reduction and the need for comprehensive safety training for volunteers. The final presentation focused on the 593-day closure in Malaysia and the key role played by YSS, a non-profit, semi-governmental organisation. YSS focused on four main areas during the crisis: rapid response, federal support, educational support and capacity building. Youth play an important role in crises and strengthened public-private collaboration, which helped to effectively address national challenges during the lockdown.

The **Pecha-Kucha** began by considering how to rethink what a volunteer is and how to reconstruct the concept of 'volunteer development' without being bound by age, nationality or other barriers. It highlighted the importance of understanding the needs and aspirations of volunteers and the challenge of building bridges without knowing what is on the other side. This was followed by a presentation on the role of psychological contracts and emotional labour in volunteering. Psychological contracts are broken when volunteers are not emotionally invested or their needs are not met. The fulfilment of psychological contracts is supported by solid relationships and flexibility around work. Volunteers' emotional labour can lead to dissatisfaction and burnout if it is not recognised or acknowledged. Emotional regulation and fairness are important, and emotional management of volunteers can create more cohesive and resilient organisations. The final presenter looked at how to mobilise more volunteers through a school for life model. It focused on entrepreneurship, recreation, food, water, shelter and energy.



Discussion following the presentations focused on the contextual nature of volunteer motivations and the ways in which volunteers can be excluded from volunteering, for example through vulnerability or neurodivergence, and how the move towards corporate recruitment models for volunteer recruitment can exclude certain groups.

While safeguarding is important and there is a need to be transparent with volunteers about barriers and risks, more could be done to work towards transforming inequalities. It was felt that honest conversations with volunteers to find solutions were important and that there was a need for more research in this area.

Questions for discussion

- **What can we be doing to continually integrate processes of learning and unlearning that challenge unsustainability?**
- **How can we make our ways of being and doing more reciprocal, accountable, reflexive and horizontal in volunteering and development?**
- **In the face of deepening uncertainty and crisis, how can we use, expand and reshape existing resources to build strategies and approaches (with a focus on ethics and integrity) that foster more socially and environmentally just futures?**

2. Exploring Relationships for Solidarities in Times of Crises

***'I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people.'* – Eduardo Galeano**

Aim

Day 2 focused on examining the types of relationships in volunteering, whether they are fit for purpose and how we might strengthen them to shape more sustainable ways of working. On this day we flipped the script to collectively explore ideas of 'failure' and how these ideas can be a starting point for change. Through engaging sessions and conversations, delegates were invited to share their experiences and collectively consider the relationships and solidarities that are needed at times of compounded crises, and how these can be created and sustained through volunteering. The aim was to:

- *Critically reflect on the status quo and unpack what solidarity in its diversity currently looks like in volunteering spaces.*
- *Draw from each other's experiences to identify areas that need reform and areas where good practices need to be enhanced and be used in shared learning.*

Context

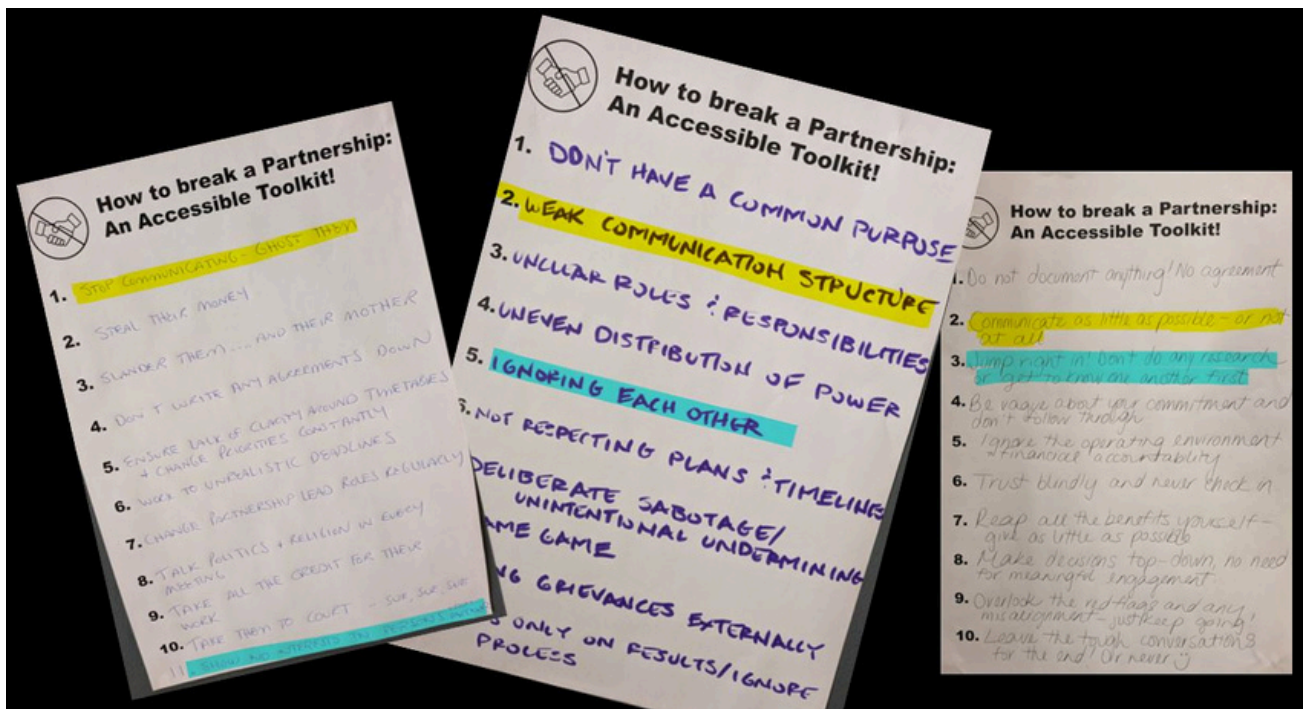
IVCO 2024 drew attention to ideas of relationships and solidarity within and across the global volunteering community. There are many definitions of solidarity and many examples of how it is present in volunteering and development. Rather than looking for a 'one size fits all' policy or approach, the sector will thrive by exploring how this richness and diversity can support the emergence of new ways of being and doing in the face of multiple crises.

Drawing on each other's experiences to explore new ideas provides an opportunity to consider how solidarity may already be present in current theories and practices of volunteering today, and how it can be strengthened in the future.

The concept of failure is important within and across all these discussions and reflections. Volunteer managers, volunteers themselves, academics, policy-makers and all stakeholders in the volunteering and development sector certainly encounter and experience failure in different ways. But we often lack the mechanisms to challenge it as something inherently negative and instead see it as an opportunity for learning, challenge or change. At a time when the traditional focus of aid and development flows is coming under increasing scrutiny, there is an urgent need to consider how volunteering might enable more meaningful and sustainable social change, and the role(s) of solidarity within this. This involves moving into new and emergent spaces and requires us to become more comfortable with trying, testing and embracing the idea of failure and learning from it. We are rarely encouraged to consider and explore what failure looks like in our relationships.

Highlights from the discussions

The day began with a session that challenged delegates to examine failure in the context of existing and potential future connections and relationships. In small groups, participants were tasked with designing an accessible toolkit on how to end a partnership. This exercise encouraged participants to consider partner relationships from an unconventional perspective, sparking thought-provoking discussions. Common strategies for effectively breaking partnerships, identified across groups, included communicating as little as possible and showing no interest in the individuals involved.



A **'How-to' Workshop** provided insights from Habitat for Humanity's global volunteering programme, including their approach to working with communities and stakeholders to provide affordable housing solutions and how they work with volunteers to achieve this. Volunteer recruitment, pre-departure engagement, in-country experience and post-departure engagement were discussed, as well as how volunteer processes have evolved before and after COVID-19, highlighting significant changes in volunteer operations. This was followed by a presentation from the Peace Corps on their volunteer model, with insights into how the organisation supports national volunteer programmes by fostering an enabling environment for volunteerism and working with local programmes. The organisation's concept of the volunteer pipeline was also presented, with a focus on how creating a supportive environment during the volunteer programme helps volunteers in their next phase.



A **Strategy Conversation** focused on changing relationships for a world in crisis, highlighting the importance of thinking about solidarity in the face of the growth of the far right and countering it by standing up to racism. Serve Global presented on increasing youth participation in climate change adaptation and good governance through volunteering in Africa.

Youth in Africa are particularly affected by high unemployment, which also influences migration patterns. The presenter also highlighted the impact of the climate emergency on young Africans in particular, exacerbating instability and poverty levels. Volunteering was discussed as a way for young people to contribute to these challenges, fulfil their potential and stay in their country to contribute to good governance. This was followed by a presentation from the Waker Welfare Action Association, which focused on Eastern insights for cross-cultural volunteer engagement and crisis response. Building relationships with volunteers is important and can be facilitated by involving volunteers in a variety of activities (e.g. sharing experiences, attending conferences, applying for other projects). It is important to think from the volunteer's perspective when developing a volunteer management strategy (based on personal development, cross-cultural experiences, etc.) and to create an 'open-ended' volunteer journey through continuous engagement. It is also crucial to harness the power of teams through the collective action of volunteers.

In the final presentation, CECL explored the power of women's mutual mentorship to create transformative change in the context of colonialism. CECL's Volunteer Cooperation Programme matches Canadian volunteer women entrepreneurs with women entrepreneurs in the global South for mutual mentorship. The initiative has facilitated peer learning, sharing

of expertise and best practices to promote the adoption of sustainable and equitable business practices that significantly improve the economic and social well-being of women and their communities. This has been something of a paradigm shift for CEI. In the discussion, delegates reflected on the challenges and barriers affecting volunteering programmes due to recent crises, including funding crises, the global pandemic (e.g. online volunteering), visa issues, mental health issues, security and safety issues. Visa issues and more restrictive visa and border regimes have affected programmes and weakened relationships with partners abroad. In responding to these challenges, organisations need to be creative, develop new partnerships, apply relationship-centred approaches to volunteering and consider ways to decolonise volunteering. Ongoing engagement and support for volunteers is important, as is the need to pay attention to mental health issues. It was recognised that organisations need to be flexible and adaptable as different types of crises, for example, require different approaches to volunteering.

A **Human Library** session began with a historical review of what we call international volunteering, to understand how it has been shaped and influenced by different political and spiritual periods, such as the Vietnam War, pacifist military service and faith. This historical overview highlighted the need to examine not only the concept of international volunteering, but also solidarity and how it works. It also suggested that there are challenging tensions between the origins of volunteering and its contemporary practice. We need to unpack and understand the context-specific areas in which volunteering operates, revisiting those actions that remain relevant while challenging those that no longer reflect contemporary values.



This was followed by a presentation on research from Northumbria University unpacking the participation of young people with disabilities in development in Zimbabwe. There was an exploration of the definition of Ubuntu as a way of being, an understanding that a person is a person through other people. This definition can change depending on positionality and context. The presenter explored her own positionality as a form of kindness and gratitude that includes caring for oneself and caring beyond human beings, and went on to explore the tension she experienced between what is defined as ethical by academic institutions and the Ubuntu perspective within the community. The final presentation from the University of Dundee explored the learning experiences of coastguard volunteers, who are considered emergency volunteers in the UK. Exploring their stories and experiences is essential to building awareness and collaboration in the context of emergencies. There was a strong focus on well-being. This requires attention to trauma and hostile situations in challenging contexts and environments, while promoting informal spaces for volunteers to share their experiences, build trust, and explore their learning processes.

A **Pecha-Kucha** began with local representatives from Bensham Grove Community Centre and Durham University sharing their experiences of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. They talked about the importance of building relationships and taking time to listen to people to find out what they really needed, and the value of tea and cake in the listening process. This process can bring trauma to the surface and they emphasised the value of being able to sit with trauma, which often does not have an immediate resolution. The advice was to "do what makes you shine and spread your sparkle". They also mentioned a Building Bridges manual they had developed. This was followed by a powerful series of images, curated by the Leitrim Volunteer Centre, reflecting that we all have the power to change the world and there are many ways to do so. We can show solidarity by showing up for those who need us. This was followed by a presentation from the VSA, which shared the results of research into the value of international volunteering to volunteers in New Zealand, showing that two thirds had an increased interest and willingness to act on international issues after their volunteering experience, and nine out of ten felt a strong emotional connection to their placement country and/or its people. Caring was a common thread running through the presentations and expressions of active citizenship. Individuals need a desire to support and contribute to community or global causes. Volunteering is political, but we should harness the power of this and turn it back on itself to make it as apolitical as possible. Training on how to look after and support volunteers shouldn't be necessary, it should be a basic framework that is part of everything the volunteer interacts with.

Questions for discussion

- ***Are there 'quiet' or 'hidden' elements of solidarity that we may be missing within our everyday work and practice? Who are we involving in our discussions, and who are we missing?***
- ***What might failure look like within our work and how might it be achieved?***
- ***How can we use this as a starting point to explore challenges and uncertainties across our relationships, using this to develop more solidarity-based approaches?***



3. Embarking on a Collective Journey of Volunteering for Transformative Change

***'Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships.'* – adrienne maree brown**

Aim

Day 3 focused on sharing existing practices and exploring new approaches to relationships that can enhance the impact of volunteering and strengthen our capacities to navigate the crises of today and tomorrow. We explored how volunteering is being re-imagined and re-configured to build solidarities to promote sustainable development. There was a focus on the connections between the kinds of relationships that volunteering can create and produce, and how these relationships can enhance capacities, promote resilience, speak back to power, and shape more sustainable ways of living and being. The aim was to consider:

- *How might a better relationship with ourselves, with others and with the environment contribute to strengthening personal and collective resilience and creating the better world we know is possible?*
- *How might we move towards a 'volunteering for solidarity' approach that challenges the traditional focus of aid and development flows and enables more meaningful and lasting social change?*
- *Moving forward, what are the limitations of 'volunteering for solidarity' and how can we better support each other to sustain relationships that promote transformative change?*

Context

Improving relationships with ourselves, others and the environment is central to achieving transformative change through volunteering. In the midst of moments of turmoil and unpredictability in the world in which we live and work, fostering personal and collective resilience becomes imperative.

The complexity of existing and emerging challenges we face across contexts requires us to expand our capacity for engagement and mutual empowerment. The conference spaces aimed to support practitioners, academics and stakeholders to explore how volunteering can create connections at different levels – community, national, international – and build new solidarities that challenge the traditional focus of aid and development flows and contribute to meaningful and sustainable social change. In order to create the conditions in which generative relationships can be built, nurtured and sustained, it is crucial to reflect on whether and in what ways organisations and stakeholders involved in volunteering are committed to creating the long-term conditions necessary to foster respectful and mutually supportive relationships.

Highlights from the discussions

A plenary session explored key lessons for the future through a dialogue on what it means to move from 'volunteering for development' to 'volunteering for solidarity', and what we might need to 'pack' for this journey. Practical examples were used to explore approaches to building solidarity and sustaining relationships in times of crisis. A panel session explored how volunteering can challenge inequalities and build alternative strategies and approaches (with a focus on ethics and integrity) that promote a more socially and environmentally just futures.

A **'How-to' Workshop** critically examined the value of understanding and evidencing the impact of volunteering, not only as a reflective exercise but also as a foundation for informed investment and policy-making. The UNV highlighted a persistent lack of disaggregated data on volunteering, with a global volunteer index proposed as a potential tool to address this gap by capturing, tracking, and sharing missing data. However, the creation of such an index is a politically sensitive and complex process, as some member states remain sceptical about the implications of scrutiny and comparisons it may invite. Additionally, the language of measurement and indices may alienate certain volunteering stakeholders, making it essential to balance quantitative metrics with qualitative insights. Delegates highlighted gaps in the current narratives about measurement, such as the absence of partnerships and an exploration of the potential negative impacts of volunteering. They also raised challenges including diverse perceptions of outcomes, the extended timelines required to realise impact, and the ripple effects on coordinating organisations, funders, policy-makers, governments, and civil society. This underscores the importance of ensuring that debates around volunteer measurement reflect the nuanced realities of volunteering and its broader implications.

A **Strategy Conversation** began with a presentation from Norec on the development of a Climate Action Working Group, set up because of the need for voluntary organisations to share knowledge about how they are tackling climate change in the sector. A focus on climate action is not imposed by funders and it is left to organisations to take the initiative. Money is available, but it is not enough and tends to focus on mitigation rather than adaptation. This was followed by a presentation from Pista Mágica on volunteer knowledge sharing. The Erasmus project has developed an online forum through many different European partners to provide training in several languages. An online platform has been developed through partners and networks, including an online course on volunteering.

Consideration has been given to the impact of cultural diversity and how and what training is needed. The definition of volunteering varies between cultures and countries, which has been a challenge. There is a need to simplify training, especially in informal contexts, and to simplify language, removing technical language and jargon. Co-creation was the best way to develop this training to ensure it meets needs and also allows the use of local languages and descriptions. Finally, a presentation from the Forum highlighted that 2026 will be the International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development. To mark this, there will be a call to action and a challenge paper on key strategic issues for volunteering and sustainable development in the future. There was a discussion about who needs to be involved in these high-level conversations, who are calls to action for, and how to address the decline of volunteering in specific contexts.

A **Human Library** session began with a presentation from VSO on their work supporting communities to access justice, human rights and alternative livelihoods in the context of extractive industries and the use of child labour in Tanzania. A shortage of long-term international volunteers has led to the development of a blended approach to volunteering. Longer-term national volunteers work alongside shorter-term international volunteers, encouraging skill-sharing and learning within volunteer communities. Key strategies included community-led monitoring initiatives and the promotion of socially responsible mining companies that involve communities in the design and monitoring of project implementation. There was some discussion about the risk of participation being used by mining companies to manipulate communities. This was followed by a presentation from the Peace Corps, which focuses on empowering youth climate leaders in rural communities in the Pacific. They train rural youth volunteers, providing them with knowledge, resources and leadership skills (especially 'soft skills') to become climate activists. They have participated in international youth climate conventions in the Pacific, promoting South-South youth solidarity, and brought back ideas for action in their communities.

The final presentation was from the Waker Welfare Action Association and looked at transnational accountability through volunteer service, focusing on transitions in volunteer and donor identities. Volunteers are supported to simultaneously take on different roles such as volunteer, promoter, donor, accountability holder and follower. The organisation is run through these cycles of transition, where donors can become volunteers and vice-versa, and many of the volunteers are also promoters. This highlighted the power of a volunteer to do more than just typical volunteering, as they can get other people to donate or recruit other volunteers.



A **Pecha-Kucha** began with a presentation on the CLÉ programme, a Canadian volunteer cooperation initiative focused on strengthening education to improve the economic well-being of girls and women. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is a key component of its learning programmes, designed to facilitate the transition to entrepreneurship and employment. The programme is currently active in six African countries. The speaker highlighted how volunteering has helped to strengthen TVET programmes and support the development of sustainable and prosperous outcomes in partner countries. This was followed by a presentation from Oxfam Québec on resistance and innovation in feminist volunteering in times of crisis. It considered how to improve the socio-economic wellbeing of women and girls. It gave a cross-cutting perspective on different areas with a focus on innovation, such as helping parties develop new methodologies with human-centred design and inclusion, such as working with indigenous people in Peru and disabled people.

The final presentation was from VSO on the role and responsibilities of local volunteers. It focused on an education programme in Pakistan, working with four local organisations to provide education to marginalised girls, refugees and children with disabilities. Volunteers play a role in promoting education by working with communities, parents and children. Local volunteers are crucial as they have context-specific knowledge and contribute to creating sustainable solutions to educational challenges. The discussion focused on how to use approaches that begin to decolonise volunteering by putting partners first, working with local volunteers, promoting two-way learning and moving away from the concept of volunteering as a global north concept. Ways to facilitate power-sharing were also explored, such as shared decision-making, shadowing community decisions, and working closely with local activists to ensure that volunteering is community-driven and responsive to local needs.

Questions for discussion

- ***What kinds of solidarities and connections can volunteering mobilise to support greater equity, social justice and sustainability, and at what scales?***
- ***How can we build, nurture and strengthen those connections, despite myriad challenges?***
- ***How can we become more comfortable with trying and testing and embracing the idea of failing, knowing that our world and its challenges are complex and ever-changing?***
- ***How might we move towards a ‘volunteering for solidarity’ approach?***

4. Connecting Research and Practice

Immediately following the main conference days, IVCO hosted the **Research, Practice, Policy, and Learning (RPPL) day**. The RPPL group plays a pivotal role in shaping Forum's research priorities and oversees a register of ongoing studies. Meeting monthly, the group facilitates presentations and discussions on current research projects while also commissioning research and strategic initiatives on behalf of Forum's membership. The RPPL Day aimed to bring Forum members together with researchers and academics specialising in volunteering and development, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange in the field.

The RPPL Day began with a visual poster presentation, providing delegates with the opportunity to share knowledge and insights drawn from their past achievements, ongoing projects, and future aspirations. This was followed by a thought-provoking presentation by Northumbria University on the 'invisible economies' of engaged research. The session invited delegates to reflect on various forms of engaged research, the challenges they face, and emerging strategies to enhance meaningful engagement. Discussions also explored the value and benefits of engagement, while acknowledging the inequalities inherent in opportunities for participation. For instance, early-career researchers often struggle to find the time, space, and capacity to engage meaningfully, unlike their more established counterparts, who typically have greater autonomy over their work. This highlighted the importance of addressing these disparities to foster more inclusive and equitable research engagement practices.

The next session featured facilitated group work, prompting delegates to delve into research design and learning. Participants explored key questions such as: How do we develop a research question? How can we broaden our approaches to conducting research? What challenges arise in the process? How can we learn from one another's experiences and methods? How might we do things differently? These discussions encouraged a reflective and collaborative approach to improving research practices.



Following lunch, a second round of facilitated group work during the RPPL day shifted the focus to research ethics, impact, and policy influence. Delegates considered questions like: How can we ensure our research is conducted in a way that is respectful to everyone involved, both during and after the process? What becomes of research after it is completed? Who are the intended audiences or stakeholders we aim to influence? How can we learn from each other’s successes and challenges in achieving impact?

These conversations underscored the importance of collaboration and critical reflection in advancing research practices in the field of volunteering and development. By fostering dialogue on research design, ethics, and impact, the day provided a platform for delegates to exchange ideas, address common challenges, and envision more inclusive, impactful, and ethical approaches to research. These discussions highlighted the importance of collective learning as a catalyst for meaningful change within the volunteering and development sector.

Concluding Remarks to Continue the Journey

At the opening plenary session of IVCO 2024, delegates were invited to reflect on what they hoped to gain from being together during the conference and what would help them achieve these goals, both individually and collectively through a word cloud exercise. Participants expressed a common desire to be inspired, to make meaningful connections and to engage in cross-learning conversations. They emphasised the importance of building relationships and fostering new partnerships to promote knowledge sharing, collaboration and sustainable ways of working in the volunteering and development sector. Dialogue, openness and (active) listening emerged as central keywords alongside curiosity, sharing, networking, care and respect, also underlining the importance of inclusivity in building strong relationships.



At the end of the conference, delegates reflected on their key learnings and takeaways through the feedback survey, revisiting many of these key themes. They highlighted the diversity of approaches and challenges across organisations and the pressing need for collaboration, cross-learning and the inclusion of global South perspectives in decision-making to strengthen solidarity. Practical insights included learning from failure, questioning the 'why' of volunteering, and prioritising care and empathy.

Several delegates reported returning home with plans to adopt the Global Standards for Volunteering, use newly-learned partnership tools and adopt more people-centred approaches to their work in the sector. Strengthening alumni networks, maintaining local and international relationships and learning from different volunteering models were also identified as priorities by many. Other insights ranged from refining impact measurement practices to exploring volunteer journey models. Finally, participants emphasised the importance of ethical research practices and of continuing to develop more equitable North-South relationships to make volunteering practices more inclusive, reciprocal and impactful in order to drive transformative change.

These learnings from IVCO 2024 provide a strong foundation for IVCO 2025, where the focus will shift to the pivotal role volunteers play in strengthening civil society, countering challenges, and fostering peace within and across borders, guided by Cambodia's profound belief that 'peace begins with the individual'. We hope to see you there!

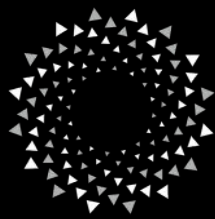


Further Information

Access the [IVCO 2024 Archive](#), including the conference's background paper and the full series of insightful think pieces:

- Think Piece 1: **“Building and Sustaining Connections for Change: Volunteering for Solidarity in Gateshead”** written by Christine Frazer (Bensham Grove Community Centre and Relationships Project). <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.26048599.v1>
- Think Piece 2: **“The right to solidarity as a practice that strengthens citizenship”** written by Hernando A. Estévez (La Salle University). <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.26137471.v1>
- Think Piece 3: **“Bridging theory and practice: the potential for building solidarity between volunteer-involving organisations and academic institutions”** written by Rebecca Pursell-Gotz (VSO). <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.26255750.v1>
- Think Piece 4: **“Unpacking the vā of international volunteering for development: Giving-as-relationship-building”** written by Aarthi Srinivasan, Liyun Wendy Choo and Alofa Lopati (VSA). <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.26506621.v1>
- Think Piece 5: **“Volunteering for solidarity: The power of women’s reciprocal mentorship to trigger transformative change”** written by Cecilia Thompson, Nancy Lafrance and Marcela Vallejos (CECI). <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.26767579.v1>
- Think Piece 6: **“The role of volunteering in crisis management: A beacon of solidarity and resilience”** written by Amjad Mohamed-Saleem (IFRC). <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.26831359.v1>
- Think Piece 7: **“Growing the Circle of Service: Towards a more collaborative approach to recruitment”** written by Ted Adams (Peace Corps). <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.26840038.v1>
- Think Piece 8: **“To build a bridge that unites us, and withstands the storm”** written by Jan Olav Baarøy, Kari Anette Lindemann and Tone-Merete Lillesvangstu (Norec). <https://doi.org/10.25398/rd.northumbria.26872735.v1>

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