

Space for difficult knowledge:
Reflections on solidarity volunteering in a
time of crisis

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Background

As the Irish Association of Development Workers and Volunteers, Comhlámh has worked for over 50 years with people and organisations concerned with solidarity, global citizenship and voluntary action. This paper was prepared to accompany and inform a presentation at the Development Studies Association 2026 Annual Conference, held at UCD in July 2026.

For the past two decades, a substantial part of our work has focused on supporting international volunteer sending agencies to strengthen practice around values-led, solidarity-based volunteering. This paper draws on our experience of working, cumulatively, with over 80 organisations, large and small, who have played a significant role in Ireland's international development programme. Between 2015 and 2020 we conducted an annual, in-depth survey with volunteer sending agencies which showed that they organised placements for approximately 10,000 volunteers from Ireland, in 50+ countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America (Comhlámh, 2015 - 2020). Nearly all placements ceased during the Covid-19 pandemic: since then, they have been increasing each year, and Comhlámh currently works with 25 organisations that engage approximately 1,000 volunteers annually. These reflections are also informed by our training and education programme, which engages over 500 people each year, the majority of whom are volunteers.

Values-led practice

The Comhlámh Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies (Comhlámh, 2024) has been the foundation for Comhlámh's work with volunteers and organisations. It was first conceived in the early 2000s, in response to changing trends and concerns about international volunteering. In Ireland, the state-funded Agency for Personal Service Overseas (APSO), which had offered long-term international volunteer placements for decades, had been wound down. At the same time, a growing number of for-profit



organisations were beginning to view Ireland – a place of increasing personal wealth – as a market for volunteer placements. Comhlámh’s membership of returned volunteers and development workers were increasingly concerned about the potential commercialisation of solidarity-based volunteering, acknowledging the critical importance of engaging with the wider power structures and historical context underpinning volunteering from the Global North to the Global South.

An initial initiative to map volunteer sending agencies led to the first collective efforts for the sector to self-regulate, which culminated in the launch of the first edition of the Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies in 2005. Since that time, the Code has been continuously reviewed and revised, aiming to support and challenge the international volunteering landscape in generative ways, and to connect the content to evolving local and global contexts. Values-led practice has always been central to this work: this is most clearly articulated in the current edition of the Code (2024) which acknowledges “an increased recognition of the need for mutually supportive relationships that recognise the interconnectedness and interdependence of people and planet”. In this paper, we explore the circumstances and context that informed the development of the most recent, most challenging, edition of the Code.

A context of change, uncertainty, and volatility: how to respond in ways that are rooted in values and awareness of difficult knowledge?

The Covid-19 pandemic led to widespread changes in the international volunteering sector: some Irish-based volunteer sending agencies paused operations, while many made the decision to completely cease operations. Among the Code members who remained active, there was a widespread recognition of the need to re-examine ways of working that acknowledge the drivers of unsustainability and the need for radical change rooted in an awareness of interdependence. In consultation with these members, we began a process of deep – often uncomfortable – consideration of the role of international volunteering and its complicity in systems of harm, as described in more detail below. Key realisations emerging from this process included:

- People come to volunteering because they want to contribute, to learn, to connect and to act. Much volunteering takes place in spaces shaped by care, commitment and a desire to respond to injustice. Yet these same spaces are also full of contradiction. They are shaped by histories of colonialism, racism, inequality, extraction and unequal mobility. They are shaped by global systems in which some people can move, support, speak and be recognised, while others are displaced, contained, criminalised or silenced.
- We all exist in contradiction. We are not outside the systems we critique. We are formed by them, funded through them, educated by them and often made legible through them. In the world of international volunteering, this contradiction is not abstract. It is present in the language of help, the movement of volunteers from North to South, the expectations placed on host and receiving communities, the images used to communicate impact and the ways in which care can become entangled with power. To work for justice in this field is therefore not to work from a place of purity. It is to work while implicated in systems of harm.

The question is what we do with that implication. One response is denial. Another is paralysis, and a third is to create spaces where difficult knowledge can be named, held and worked with. Drawing on Britzman in Bryan (2016), "difficult knowledge" refers to content that is hard to bear, not only because of the subject matter itself, but because it can disrupt and unsettle learners' existing beliefs, identities, and sense of security, creating cognitive, emotional, and psychological discomfort. Therefore, in relation to this paper, difficult knowledge can be understood as forms of understanding that arise through engagement with international volunteering which not only present challenging or uncomfortable content, but also unsettle familiar assumptions about solidarity, development and helping. It is knowledge that reveals how volunteering is shaped by histories and ongoing systems of colonialism, inequality and unequal power, and how organisations and participants are themselves implicated within these structures, rather than standing outside them as neutral, depoliticised actors. In this sense, difficult knowledge disrupts stable identities and taken-for-granted moral positions, and it

requires sustained reflection on contradiction, responsibility and practice rather than offering clear or resolved answers.

In its revised approach, the Code, as its best, becomes a starting point for this deep and unsettling reflection. It can give organisations a shared language through which to move beyond, to asking whether they are doing things ‘properly’, to considering whether they are asking the right questions at all.

The Code is grounded in the values of solidarity, social justice, ecological sustainability, respect, and integrity. These values matter because they can provide the basis for critical reflection. They move the conversation beyond traditional tick-box approaches to standards, compliance, and good practice, requiring something more demanding of organisations. They ask how decisions are made, whose knowledge counts, what kinds of relationships are being built and whether volunteering practice is reproducing the very inequalities it claims to challenge.

Within this framework, we start from a recognition that values-led practice is messy and non-linear: the purpose of the Code is not to provide simple solutions or certify that organisations have achieved a gold standard. Instead, it aims to create space for engaging with difficult knowledge and challenging questions, and to support a continuing practice of reflection, revision and accountability. Comhlámh’s Code is accompanied by an holistic review tool, which is an additional resource for organisations who want to reflect on their practices and experiences, identify if and how they are living the values of the Code, and explore where they may wish to begin making change. This process has generated many difficult questions for individuals, organisations, and the wider sector:

Why are we failing?

What are we willing to let go of?

What do we need to move towards?

What does solidarity require in practice, rather than in aspiration?

These questions can feel unsettling because they do not allow us to rest in the comfort of good intentions. They ask us to look at our own organisational cultures, our assumptions, our partnerships and our habits of communication. They ask us to notice where we may be protecting existing ways of working, which may be harmful, because they are familiar, fundable or institutionally safe. This is where discomfort becomes part of the work.

Conversations about decolonisation, ecological sustainability, power and complicity often surface defensiveness. People worry about saying the wrong thing. Organisations worry about reputational risk. There can be a temptation to soften the language, to move quickly to solutions or to return to stories of positive impact. Yet difficult knowledge cannot be transformed if it is constantly managed away.

One way of holding difficult knowledge is to hold the **“AND”**. Our thinking in around this has been shaped by the work of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective (Stein, et al., 2020). Holding difficult knowledge means making space for more than one truth at the same time and recognising that volunteering can be generous and implicated. It can create connection and reproduce unequal power. It can be shaped by sincere care and by histories of colonialism. Organisations can be committed to justice and still benefit from the systems they are trying to change. Volunteers can want to act in solidarity and still carry assumptions that need to be questioned. Holding the **“AND”** does not remove the discomfort. It helps us stay with it long enough to learn from it.

This matters because difficult knowledge often asks us to resist simple stories. It asks us not to collapse complexity into either innocence or guilt. It asks us not to say that everything is harmful, or that good intentions are enough. It asks us to remain present to contradiction without rushing to defend ourselves or abandon the work altogether. In this sense, holding the **“AND”** becomes a practice of honesty. It allows us to name harm without denying the possibility of change. It allows us to value voluntary action without romanticising it. It allows us to ask harder questions while still believing that different forms of solidarity are possible.

The importance of relationality

In our work, we are seeing the need for spaces where people can stay with these tensions without being overwhelmed by them. This does not mean accepting harm or normalising hypocrisy. It means recognising that learning and change rarely happen in clean or linear ways. People and organisations often move at different speeds. They may hold strong values while also participating in practices that need to be questioned. The work is to make these contradictions visible enough to be addressed.

The Code provides one route into this process because it is relational. It is not only about what an individual organisation does internally. It is about the relationships that make volunteering possible. Relationships between sending agencies and host communities. Between volunteers and local partners. Between development education, activism and public communication. Between the local and the global. A relational approach asks whether these relationships are extractive, transactional or mutual. It asks whether they create space for shared learning and honest feedback. It asks whether power is being redistributed or simply spoken about.

The importance of a relational approach lies in its refusal to treat volunteering as an isolated act of goodwill. A relational perspective also requires volunteering to be understood within the wider political contexts in which it operates. The challenges facing volunteering exist amid ongoing social upheaval and unequal power dynamics that shape who gets to volunteer, how, and on whose terms (Millora, 2025). Volunteering can be framed as charity divorced from politics. It can be used to tell simple stories of generosity while avoiding the systems that create inequality. It can also be used by states and institutions to advance particular political agendas (Czarnota & Jagura, 2025). A relational approach resists these narrow framings by insisting that volunteering is always embedded in wider systems of power and responsibility.

Difficult knowledge

Values-led volunteering needs to recover its connection to justice. This means refusing to separate voluntary action from wider social analysis. It also means recognising that

volunteering does not happen in a neutral world. Volunteers, activists and humanitarian actors are themselves being targeted in many contexts. Search and rescue volunteers have faced criminalisation in Europe for assisting people on the move. Humanitarian first responders in Palestine have been killed while carrying out emergency work. These examples expose the limits of a depoliticised language of helping. They force us to ask whose care is protected, whose care is punished and whose suffering is made visible.

This is difficult knowledge.

It unsettles the more comfortable story that volunteering is simply about good people doing good things. It does not mean dismissing the sincerity of volunteers or the importance of voluntary action. Rather, it asks us to locate that action within systems of power. It asks what kind of political imagination is being cultivated through volunteering. Are we encouraging people to see themselves as helpers, saviours, learners, allies, organisers or participants in longer struggles for justice? These are not just differences in language. They shape practice.

In this sense, the Code can help open a wider conversation about reimagining.

Reimagining is not only about designing new programmes. It is about asking what we may need to stop doing, not just what we need to improve. It may involve questioning models of short-term placement, the dominance of North-South mobility, the framing of host communities as sites of need or the assumption that learning is centred mainly on the volunteer. It may involve paying closer attention to local solidarity work within Ireland, diaspora knowledge, migrant justice, anti-racism, ecological limits and the connections between struggles across places.

Shifting Practice

In tandem with the process of revising the Code and developing the holistic annual review, we worked to create new learning spaces for volunteers. Within these, they are encouraged to engage with difficult knowledge and supported to nurture action that is

grounded in awareness and the values of equality and solidarity. Through spaces such as conversation clubs connected to our E-Tick Ethical Communication course (2025), the Dara Ecological Sustainability Project, our collaboration with UCD Volunteers Overseas on the Be the Change and Seeding Change courses, and the DEFY Project's Shifting Edges (2026) training for educators, we can see people trying to work differently. These spaces do not always begin with certainty. Often, they begin with questions, and with questioning, as is illustrated in responses from learners:

"Change has to happen within before we seek it outside" (UCDVO's Be the Change course participant)

"There can't be a separation between 'radical' 'depth' 'difficult' programming and more mainstream/traditional programming which fails to acknowledge this. We're failing participants and ourselves if we also deliver programmes which are more simplistic and don't gesture towards these kinds of questions." (DEFY project, Shifting Edges course participant)

"I was challenged to reflect on my contribution to the mess" (UCDVO's Seeding Change course participant)

"It's for those who want to stop rushing straight to 'solutions' and campaigns without first sitting with what all of this does to us" (DEFY project, Shifting Edges course participant)

The link between the local and the global is central here. International solidarity cannot be imagined only as movement outwards from Ireland to elsewhere. It must also be practised in how we understand Ireland's place in global systems. This includes migration, racism, climate responsibility, corporate power, militarisation, development policy and the everyday ways in which global inequality is present locally. If volunteering is to be values-led, it must help people make these connections. It must resist the idea that justice is somewhere else and that solidarity is something we offer from a distance.

At the same time, there is a need for humility. Reimagining does not mean that we already know what should replace existing models. Justice work, ecological sustainability and

solidarity are not simple destinations. They are contested, incomplete and sometimes uncomfortable practices. Organisations will make mistakes. People will disagree. Some conversations will feel unresolved. But this is not a reason to avoid them. It is a reason to build the capacity to stay in them with care, honesty and accountability.

Conclusion

For Comhlámh, the Code of Good Practice offers one way to hold this work. It does not remove contradiction. It does not place organisations outside the systems they are trying to change. It does not solve the deeper political problems facing international volunteering, but it can create a shared space from which to ask better questions. It can support organisations to move from performance towards reflection, from compliance towards learning and from isolated practice towards community.

The work ahead is therefore not only to strengthen good practice. It is to **deepen** our collective capacity for difficult knowledge. To ask where we are complicit. To ask where our language is too easy. To ask who is missing from the conversation. To ask what forms of volunteering are still possible and what forms we may need to leave behind. To ask how solidarity can be practised in a world marked by unequal power, ecological crisis and political violence. As phrased by a participant in Seeding Change, to consider “the challenges of coming to terms with complicity in a flawed system”.

These questions do not offer comfort. But perhaps comfort is not what the moment requires. What is needed is a way of staying present to contradiction without being defeated by it. A way of acting without pretending innocence. A way of learning that is relational, honest and unfinished. Holding the “**AND**” can help us do this. It can help us say that volunteering can matter and also need to change. That care can exist alongside harm. That solidarity can be imperfect and still be necessary. This is where values-led volunteering can still matter. Not as a claim that we have resolved the contradictions, but as a commitment to keep working through them together.

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Authors and citation

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