Comhlámh
GLOBAL SOLIDARITY IN ACTION

Making Space for Difficult Knowledge:

Reflections from IVY 2026 on Solidarity Volunteering in Times of Crisis

Comhlámh, November 2026

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About Comhlámh

Established in 1975, Comhlámh is the Irish association of international development workers and volunteers. As a membership organization, we build and mobilise community around global justice issues. Comhlámh nurtures and supports work for change, locally and globally, and advocates for a world beyond injustice.

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Irish Aid
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
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About this publication

This publication brings together seven reflections and contributions from Comhlámh and colleagues across the volunteering and civil society sectors. Together, they explore the meaning and practice of solidarity, the role of volunteering in advancing global justice, and the conditions needed to sustain meaningful participation and collective action.

The contributions draw on personal experience, organisational learning, policy engagement and critical reflection. They consider the challenges and possibilities of solidarity in a time of crisis and ask what is needed to ensure that volunteering contributes to more just, inclusive and democratic societies.

Introduction: Solidarity in Practice – Reflections on Volunteering, Global Justice and Social Change by Dr Caroline Murphy, Comhlámh

What does it mean to practise solidarity in an increasingly unequal, interconnected and uncertain world? How can volunteering and civic action contribute to meaningful social change? And what relationships, values and structures are needed to sustain the people and organisations working towards a more just world

1. **Making space for difficult knowledge: Reflections on solidarity volunteering in a time of crisis** by Bronwyn April, Fiachra Brennan, Dervla King and Caroline Murphy, Comhlámh

This contribution provides the central framing for the publication, exploring what it means to practise solidarity through international volunteering in a time of crisis. It examines the tensions and contradictions inherent in volunteering, the importance of engaging with difficult knowledge, and the role of Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice in supporting more critical, reflective and values-led approaches. It asks how we can hold complexity while continuing to imagine and work towards change.

2. **Two wonderful afternoons discussing the End Orphanage Volunteering campaign at DCU's Volunteer Fairs** by Karthik Mahalingam

Drawing on his experience as a graduate of UCDVO's Be the Change and Seeding Change courses, Karthik reflects on conversations with students at DCU's Volunteer Fairs. Through these encounters, he considers how people come to understand the ethical questions surrounding volunteering, including orphanage volunteering, and the importance of creating opportunities for informed discussion and responsible choices.

3. **Holding the Work: Creating Reflective Spaces for People Working & Volunteering in Migration & Community, Social and International Development** by Bronwyn April, Comhlámh

This contribution explores the value of reflective spaces for people working and volunteering in migration, integration and community development. It considers the emotional and structural pressures that shape this work, including racism and the demands of supporting others in challenging circumstances. It makes the case for collective reflection and care as essential to sustaining people and strengthening the work they do.

4. **Where do I Start? Reflections on IVY 2026** by Fiachra Brennan, Comhlámh

Reflecting on Comhlámh's history and the UN International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026), Fiachra considers how people can begin or deepen their engagement with solidarity. Connecting local and global action, he explores the role of Global Citizenship Education and introduces approaches such as journaling and zine-making as ways to support personal reflection, learning and action.

5. **Joint submission to the public consultation on Irish Aid's Global Citizenship Education Strategy** by Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice network

This contribution presents the Code of Good Practice network's response to the public consultation on Irish Aid's Global Citizenship Education Strategy. It highlights the contribution international volunteering can make to global citizenship education, while emphasising the importance of ethical practice, meaningful partnerships and appropriate resourcing. It also draws on learning from initiatives including E-TICK and DEFY, and from European approaches to volunteering and global learning.

6. **The role of volunteering in enabling inclusive democratic participation Nina Arwitz, CEO, Volunteer Ireland.**

Drawing on an input to an EESC hearing, Nina discusses how volunteering is a key part of inclusive democratic participation, and supports social cohesion and community resilience. Investing in volunteering infrastructure is therefore essential, as is politically acknowledging and protecting the role volunteering plays in supporting democratic participation and civic engagement.

7. **Volunteering, Civic Space and Resilience: Why Safeguarding Volunteers Matters** by Dervla King, Comhlámh

As IVY 2026 draws to a close, Dervla reflects on the global Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering, highlighting the need to protect volunteers from growing threats such as harassment, intimidation, disinformation and hostility. She explores how safeguarding volunteers is essential not only for participation and civic engagement, but also for the social trust and community networks that underpin resilience and preparedness.

Introduction

Solidarity in Practice – Reflections on Volunteering, Global Justice and Social Change

Dr Caroline Murphy, CEO, Comhlámh

What does it mean to practise solidarity in an increasingly unequal, interconnected and uncertain world? How can volunteering and civic action contribute to meaningful social change? And what relationships, values and structures are needed to sustain the people and organisations working towards a more just world?

These questions have been central to Comhlámh's work for 50 years. They have taken on renewed significance in a global context shaped by ecological breakdown, political instability, war and displacement, deepening inequalities and growing threats to human rights and democratic participation. Across many contexts, civic space is narrowing, with volunteers, activists, humanitarian workers and civil society organisations increasingly facing restrictions, intimidation and, in some cases, criminalisation as a consequence of their work in support of others. At a time when the challenges facing people and communities are increasingly interconnected, collective responses and expressions of solidarity are essential. But we must also remain attentive to how solidarity is understood, whose interests it serves and what it asks of us in practice.

Founded in 1975 by returned development workers, Comhlámh emerged from a belief that Ireland's engagement with the wider world should be grounded in solidarity rather than charity. This was a political and values-led position, recognising that international development and volunteering cannot be separated from the historical and contemporary relationships of power that shape our world. Over five decades, this commitment has found expression through

volunteer-led activism, campaigning, education, international volunteering and the development of networks and partnerships connecting people working towards social and global justice.

A distinctive part of Comhlámh's contribution has been its commitment to critical reflection: supporting volunteers and development workers to examine their experiences, understand global inequalities and connect personal commitments with wider struggles for change. This has included developing standards and good practice in international volunteering, creating opportunities for learning and dialogue, and challenging assumptions about the role and impact of volunteering. It has also meant recognising the importance of care and reflection in sustaining people engaged in volunteering and solidarity work. From our early Coming Home weekends to more recent psychosocial resources and reflective practice initiatives, we have sought to recognise that building a culture of justice also requires building a culture of care.

These strands of work are connected by an understanding of solidarity as both a value and a practice. Solidarity is not simply something we offer to others, nor is it an expression of goodwill or shared concern alone. It is built through relationships, mutual learning and collective action, and through an acknowledgement of our interdependence. It requires us to understand the structural conditions that produce inequality and injustice, while recognising our own positions and responsibilities within these systems. It also asks us to consider whose knowledge and experiences shape our understanding, how we work together, and whether our everyday practices reflect the values we espouse.

This is particularly important in relation to volunteering. Volunteering can create opportunities for meaningful engagement, learning, connection and collective action. It can contribute to social cohesion, democratic participation and movements for justice, locally and internationally. However, volunteering is not inherently transformative. It takes place within wider social, political and economic structures and can, at times, reproduce the very inequalities it seeks to address. Good intentions are not enough. Values-led practice requires critical reflection, accountability and a willingness to question established models and assumptions. Solidarity is not a fixed or settled position, but something that must be continually negotiated and renewed through practice.

The contributions in this publication explore these questions through different aspects of Comhlámh's work and its engagement with the wider volunteering, development and civil society sectors. Bringing together academic reflection, personal experience, organisational learning and policy engagement, they explore what it means to practise solidarity in different contexts. They examine the challenges of engaging with difficult knowledge and contradiction in international volunteering, and the importance of supporting people to make informed, ethical and values-led choices, including through the campaign to end orphanage volunteering. They consider the value of reflective spaces for those working and volunteering in migration, integration and community development, alongside the contribution of volunteering to global citizenship education and public policy.

Other reflections look to the opportunities and challenges of the UN International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026), explore the relationship between volunteering and democracy, and highlight the importance of safeguarding volunteers and protecting the civic spaces in which participation and solidarity can flourish. They also draw attention to the growing pressures facing those engaged in solidarity and civic action, including restrictions on their work, intimidation and the criminalisation of volunteers and activists.

Although these contributions approach their subjects from different perspectives, they share an interest in the conditions that enable solidarity to be practised and sustained. They highlight the connections between international and local action,

education and activism, individual experience and structural inequality. They also remind us that meaningful participation depends not only on the commitment of individuals, but on the quality of the relationships, organisational cultures, networks and support structures around them.

A recurring theme is the relationship between reflection and action. How do we move beyond awareness and good intentions towards a deeper understanding of injustice and a commitment to addressing it? How do organisations ensure that their values are reflected in their structures, relationships and everyday decisions? And how do we sustain people and organisations working for change in contexts that are often difficult, demanding and increasingly hostile? These questions invite us to look beyond individual acts of volunteering and consider the wider conditions in which solidarity is nurtured and expressed. Solidarity requires us not only to act differently, but also to change the conditions in which we act.

Recognising the contribution of volunteering and solidarity therefore means recognising what is needed to sustain them. The relationships, networks, shared standards, spaces for critical reflection and opportunities for learning that underpin values-led volunteering do not happen by themselves. They are built over time through the commitment of volunteers, organisations, communities and partners, and require appropriate resources and sustained investment. If volunteering is to be recognised as a meaningful contribution to international development, global citizenship and civil society, that recognition must be reflected in policy and funding decisions. Investment is needed not only in individual programmes, but in the organisations and shared infrastructure that make good practice possible: preparing and supporting volunteers, strengthening safeguarding, creating opportunities for critical reflection and learning, and enabling organisations to collaborate and develop their practice over time. This infrastructure may be less visible than the activities it supports, but it is fundamental to their quality, accountability and longer-term contribution. Sustaining it is a shared responsibility.

IVY 2026 offers an important opportunity to bring these conversations together. While recognising and celebrating the contribution of volunteers, it also invites us to consider the kind of volunteering we want to support, the relationships we want to nurture and the structures needed to enable people to participate safely and meaningfully. For Comhlámh, IVY 2026 is an opportunity to reaffirm our understanding of volunteering as solidarity in action: not an isolated activity, but part of a wider commitment to justice, dignity, participation and collective responsibility.

As Comhlámh looks towards its next 50 years, these reflections are offered not as a definitive account of what solidarity should look like, but as a contribution to an ongoing conversation. Our experience has shown us that meaningful change is rarely linear or straightforward. It involves tensions and contradictions, and requires curiosity, courage, critical reflection and care. It asks us to listen to different perspectives, acknowledge where our own practices may need to change, and remain open to imagining different possibilities.

Solidarity is something we practise: in how we listen, learn, organise and act; in how we sustain one another; and in how we protect the spaces in which people can come together to work for change. It is never something we can take for granted or consider complete. The challenge ahead is to keep questioning how we put our values into practice, to build relationships rooted in justice and mutual respect, and to strengthen the conditions that enable people to participate and act collectively. These reflections are part of that continuing work.

Reflection 1

Space for difficult knowledge: Reflections on solidarity volunteering in a time of crisis, by Bronwyn April, Fiachra Brennan, Dervla King and Caroline Murphy, Comhlámh.

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 conceptualisations of 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 answers or certify that organisations have 'got it

right'. 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. Some of the most important questions this process has generated, are also the most difficult.

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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Reflection 2:

Two wonderful afternoons discussing the End Orphanage Volunteering campaign at DCU's Volunteer Fairs by Karthik Mahalingam, graduate of UCDVO's "Be the Change" and "Seeding Change" courses.

September 25th, 2026: This week I spent two afternoons on Comhlámh's stall at the DCU student volunteer fairs, talking to students about international volunteering and Comhlámh's work. All thanks to two amazing people, Bronwyn April and Dervla King.

Comhlámh (pronounced 'co-law-ve', Irish for 'solidarity') is the Irish association of development workers and volunteers, established in 1975.

The event was not about standing at a stall and handing out flyers to students, as one might think. It was filled with genuine conversations; seeing passionate young adults who want to apply themselves in volunteering and are genuinely looking for guidance to do that. Many hadn't heard of Comhlámh, their Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies (VSAs) which is a set of standards that 25+ VSAs have signed up to. Once they learned they could browse those signatories' programmes and apply, you could see they'd found the guidance they were looking for to take their first step in international volunteering. It was a wholesome moment for me to be able to do that.

We also got to raise awareness of the flagship campaign called "End Orphanage Volunteering".

Preparing for the event, this was something eye-opening for me to get to know and understand. Like most people, I was under the impression that any volunteering is good volunteering, and that volunteering in an orphanage abroad is an obviously good thing to do. But it is not!!!

The evidence says otherwise. More than 80% of children in orphanages worldwide have at least one living parent, and many more have extended family who could care for them with the right support. Through institutionalisation, children become vulnerable - their social, psychological and emotional needs go unmet, and they face a real risk of exploitation.

So why do so many children end up institutionalised?

It is not because they have no one, but because their families are under financial pressure and lack access to basic services. And, the uncomfortable part, foreign donations and volunteers can actually fuel the very demand that separates children from families who could raise them.

What struck me was how the solution reframes the whole problem. Rather than pouring money into institutions, redirect that support to families and communities so children can stay where they belong. It's better for the child, and it costs far less. That's what "global care reform" means, and it's why Comhlámh asks people to sign the Put Children First pledge instead of funding the orphanage model.

The best moments were watching students pause when they heard that 80% figure. You could see it land, and you could tell they'd go away and look into it, and make a better-informed call when they do.

Thank you to Dervla King, Bronwyn April and the Comhlámh team for having me, and for the reminder that good intentions aren't enough: there should be guidance, pathways and action!

Reflection 3:

Holding the Work: Creating Reflective Spaces for People Working & Volunteering in Migration and Community, Social and International Development by Bronwyn April, Comhlámh.

In recent months, Comhlámh has begun to bring our global citizenship education thinking and methodologies to new groups across Ireland. This is responding to the emerging challenges and increasingly complex and demanding realities that people working and volunteering in migration, integration and community development are responding to. Housing shortages, changing migration policies, long waiting times, limited resources and overstretched services all affect the work of those supporting migrants, refugees and communities. Alongside these pressures, the growing visibility of far right organising, increasingly hostile public discourse and the normalisation of racism are reshaping the environment in which this work takes place.

These realities do not exist outside the work; they shape the experiences of the people seeking support and they also shape the experiences of those walking alongside them.

Against this backdrop, Comhlámh recently facilitated two "Holding the Work" reflective workshops. One brought together practitioners involved in community-based integration work in Roscommon. The second was delivered with the Crosscare Migrant Project. Although the participants worked and volunteered in different organisations and settings, many described remarkably similar experiences.

Participants spoke about the tension of wanting to provide meaningful support while operating within systems that are increasingly difficult to navigate. They reflected on the frustration of encountering structural and institutional barriers that limit what can be achieved, despite their commitment and expertise. The conversations also explored the emotional impact of supporting people experiencing uncertainty, exclusion and prolonged insecurity.

The workshops recognised that this impact is not experienced equally.

For Black and Brown practitioners, migrant workers and solidarity responders with lived experience of racism or displacement, professional responsibilities may overlap with personal realities. Supporting others can mean engaging daily with issues that also affect their own lives, families and communities. This additional emotional labour is often expected but rarely acknowledged.

Rather than asking people to become more resilient in the face of harmful systems, "Holding the Work" creates space to pause, reflect and connect. It encourages participants to recognise that not everything they carry belongs to them as individuals and that many of the pressures they experience are structural rather than personal. By creating space for honest conversation, the workshops support collective reflection, mutual learning and shared responsibility.

For Comhlámh, solidarity is not only expressed through international development and social justice. It is also reflected in how organisations care for those doing this work. Making opportunities for reflection, listening and collective care is one way of sustaining individuals while strengthening teams and organisations.

Reflective spaces cannot dismantle racism, resolve the housing crisis or reform migration systems. They can, however, help organisations and groups recognise when people are carrying too much, strengthen relationships between colleagues and create cultures where care, reflection and solidarity are understood as part of good practice rather than an optional extra.

As organisations continue to respond to growing complexity across the community, development and voluntary sectors, facilitated reflective practice offers one practical way to support the people carrying this work.

Comhlámh welcomes opportunities to deliver "Holding the Work" workshops with organisations and volunteer-involving groups active across migration, integration, community development and related fields, creating space for practitioners to reflect, connect and sustain themselves and one another.

Reflection 4:

Where do I Start? Reflections on IVY 2026 by Fiachra Brennan, Comhlámh.

Through 2026 the disparate threads of volunteer action across the world have attempted to come together under one acronym – IVY. International Volunteer Year 2026 was declared by the United Nations to highlight the 'essential role volunteers play in advancing global goals, fostering resilience, and driving collective progress.'

For Comhlámh we saw IVY 2026 as an opportunity to highlight the important role of volunteering and solidarity-based action as a core pillar of civic society and an important driver of lasting change. Volunteering is not a mere activity which can be divorced from the wider social conditions within which it exists. It should be political and radical, imagining a world beyond injustice and working to achieve it through collective endeavour. The reality of that is a messy, slow, non-linear process – for individuals, for organisations and movements, and for society.

Comhlámh has lived in this space for over 50 years: some of our reflections on how we navigate this are shared in the opening article on this publication, "Space for difficult knowledge". It is worth repeating one extract here, as instructive to Comhlámh's approach to IVY 2026 and beyond.

> *'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'*

This illustrates why this work matters and why it should be valued. Fortunately, there are 50 years of evidence to support this argument. As part of our anniversary celebrations, I spent some time trawling through the Comhlámh archives and was often reminded about how Comhlámh members were usually on the right side of history. This was often in the face of dominant narratives which sought to push ideas of progress and development that were at the expense of people and planet. Reading old publications, I saw a courage and a curiosity, to ask difficult questions and to sit with difficult knowledge. Meeting members from across the generations at our events is inspiring and reaffirms for me the importance of our core values of solidarity, ecological sustainability, respect, and integrity.

The different threads of Comhlámh are not disparate. We are an ecosystem, requiring all the parts to be in balance to function. The spaces we support within Comhlámh have a range of different entry points. We meet volunteers in many different places. It could be a returned development worker who was there on Day One of Comhlámh in 1975 and has committed their life to action for global justice. It might be a retired teacher travelling abroad for the tenth year in a row, while also working for long-term change in their local community. Or a young student curious to learn more about volunteering and development, and unsure where to begin. Some volunteers travel overseas, while many work for justice here in Ireland. Our relational approach holds it all together, resisting narrowing framing of volunteering as something that only happens 'over there' and recognising how it is embedded in wider systems of power and responsibility. The work of advancing 'global goals, fostering resilience, and driving collective progress', as

IVY 2026 calls for, happens both locally and globally.

Where do I Start, our self-guided, online course is a vital entry point for people curious about exploring global justice and solidarity. Throughout 2026 I facilitated sessions with learners, introducing them to the course and delving into some of the different methodologies and approaches. Curiosity and creativity should be at the heart of any Global Citizenship Education space. Therefore, my chosen facilitation methods were journaling and zine-making – two activities that let the messy, non-linear journey flow freely. Participants were asked to reflect on two quotes taken from the course and express their response, through words and through art.

Come to look, come to climb our mountains, to enjoy our flowers. Come to study. But do not come to help.

Ivan Illich, 1968

We are in an imagination battle.... Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of ability.

adrienne maree brown, 2017

These quotes, from across geography and generations, are provocative and unsettling. As Comhlámh our role is not to offer to simplistic solutions in a complex world where uncertainty is the only constant. We don't have all the answers, but we can be a critical friend. We can spark curiosity, challenge dominant narratives, and crucially, bring people together to imagine new possibilities. Long may the work continue.

Reflection 5

Joint submission to the public consultation on Irish Aid's Global Citizenship Education Strategy, by Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice network, July 2026

This submission is made on behalf of the 25 organisations that are signatories to Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies. Together, we represent Ireland's national community of practice for values-led international volunteering, supporting approximately 1,000 international volunteers annually. Collectively, our organisations have decades of experience using Global Citizenship Education to prepare, accompany and support volunteers to engage critically with global justice, solidarity and sustainable development.

What aspects of the current Global Citizenship Education Strategy (2021–2025) have worked well?

Over the past 5 years, the sections of the current Strategy that specifically reference the connections between GCE and international volunteering have provided the most opportunities to develop our collective work: "We will support programmes which provide GCE for international volunteers both in advance of and during placements, as well as supporting volunteers to remain active global citizens on their return. International volunteering has an important role to play in fostering global citizenship and part of preparing people for international volunteer placements should be to ensure they understand the root causes of global poverty and injustice and linkages between local and global justice issues. Returnees can also have an important role in building awareness and challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about the Global South. We will ensure coherence between our support for GCE in volunteering and Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies." Between 2023 - 2025 approximately 1,000

people per year engaged in international volunteering organised by Code members. Since Covid-19, there has been steady, incremental growth in the annual number of international volunteers from Ireland. Some Code members receive funding from Irish Aid to support their GCE work with volunteers.

How has the national and global context for Global Citizenship Education changed 2021-2026, and how should the next Strategy respond to those changes?

As part of our sectoral reflections on the post-Covid landscape for international volunteering, we identified: the need for space where we can engage in shared reflection on the drivers of unsustainability; the need for radical change in undoing systems of harm; and the need for mutually supportive relationships that recognise the interdependence of people and planet. Using the space and opportunities provided by the 2012-25 GCE Strategy, our broader community has been engaging in collective processes of reflection on these themes, which has cumulatively led to important changes in thinking and practice. It is important that the next Strategy continues to encourage critical reflection, acknowledges power differentials with GCE and global justice work, and centres the priorities identified by those with whom we are in solidarity, in Ireland and throughout the Global South.

What actions could support increased uptake of GCE across formal, non-formal and informal education settings?

We'd like to highlight the significant contribution that volunteers make to advancing global justice, solidarity and equality, both within Ireland and internationally. Volunteering offers an important and often under-recognised pathway into GCE, creating opportunities for people to engage critically with global issues through lived experience, reflection and action. The role of volunteering in supporting global citizenship is already recognised within Ireland's National Volunteering Strategy, which includes a commitment to "promote ethical and skills-based international volunteering to deliver results for beneficiaries and to enhance Global Citizenship in Ireland". There is considerable potential to build on this foundation. Each year, approximately 1,000 volunteers undertake international placements from Ireland, representing a substantial constituency with an existing interest in global issues, intercultural engagement and social justice.

Throughout our work, we are seeing growing demand for learning opportunities that enable volunteers to explore the structural causes of poverty, inequality and injustice, and to better understand the connections between local and global challenges. We are also observing increasing interest in GCE across non-formal and informal learning settings, with volunteers seeking opportunities to reflect on their experiences and translate these into ongoing engagement within their communities. Volunteering can provide a powerful bridge between local and global citizenship, helping people to connect personal experiences with broader questions of justice, sustainability, human rights and international cooperation. We would therefore welcome explicit recognition within the next GCE Strategy of volunteering as a strategic pathway for Global Citizenship Education and public engagement. While volunteering is often understood primarily as a form of service, it also creates important opportunities for learning, critical reflection, solidarity and civic participation.

For many people, volunteering provides an accessible and practical entry point into deeper engagement with global issues and can act as a catalyst for longer-term involvement in community action, advocacy, civic leadership and support for international development. Volunteering is also an important entry point for migrants moving to Ireland to develop connections and form community bonds. Increasingly volunteering spaces are bringing together people from different backgrounds and varied lived experiences, supporting experiential global citizenship education and a deeper knowledge and understanding of

global issues. Supporting volunteering as a GCE pathway through dedicated resourcing, partnerships and educational initiatives would enable the Strategy to reach new audiences, strengthen engagement across formal, non-formal and informal education settings, and build on an existing area of national policy coherence between the Global Citizenship Education and National Volunteering Strategies.

What new potential practice opportunities exist which could increase GCE reach and uptake in Ireland, and Ireland's GCE influence in Europe under the next Strategy?

In addition to providing practical support and investment that strengthens the links between volunteering and GCE - thereby engaging broad and diverse audiences across Ireland - there is significant potential to build on existing areas of good practice that can further enhance Ireland's contribution to, and influence within, the European GCE sector. Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice represents a well-established example of a values-led, GCE-informed framework that supports volunteer-involving organisations to embed principles of solidarity, critical reflection, ethical engagement and global justice across their work. Organisations participating in the Code have developed considerable expertise in mainstreaming these approaches and have contributed actively to the development of innovative European resources and partnerships.

Examples include the E-TICK project, which supports ethical communication and critical engagement with representations of global issues, and the DEFY project, which equips educators with the skills and confidence to engage with complex and challenging global justice issues. Both initiatives draw on Ireland's experience of integrating volunteering and Global Citizenship Education and demonstrate the contribution that Irish organisations can make to advancing innovative practice at European level. Under the next GCE Strategy, dedicated support for the dissemination, adaptation and scaling of such initiatives would create opportunities to extend their reach within Ireland while strengthening Ireland's profile as a leader in values-led, participatory and solidarity-based approaches to Global Citizenship Education. Increased investment in transnational partnerships, practitioner exchange, research, resource development and communities of practice would enable Irish organisations to contribute more strategically to shaping emerging European approaches to GCE, volunteering and civic engagement.

Reflection 6

The role of volunteering in enabling inclusive democratic participation by Nina Arwitz, Volunteer Ireland.

A piece based on an input to an EESC (European Economic and Social Committee) hearing.

IVY 2026

2026 has been a busy and productive year for all of us, as we have worked collectively to recognise and celebrate the incredible contributions of volunteers everywhere. The UN designation of 2026 as International Volunteer Year invited everyone working to support volunteering in and from Ireland (and worldwide), to raise awareness, spark conversations, and inspire even more people to get involved. It was so positive to work together with the IVY Committee members this year to celebrate volunteering in all its forms across Ireland.

European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hearing

I had cause to reflect on the connection between volunteering and democratic participation this year, when I was invited to speak at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hearing to inform its opinion on "Inclusive democratic participation promoting civil society in

communities" in September. The Irish presidency of the EU requested the EESC to develop an exploratory opinion on this theme, a welcome development.

We were delighted that the final opinion of the EESC, which was published in October, mentions volunteering three times. More broadly the opinion also recognises the essential role of civil society organisations across Europe, as well as the need for member states and the EU to actively support and protect civil society organisations.

Notably the 9-page opinion acknowledges the essential role of volunteering in building communities and supporting participation and democratic engagement. It states "through community-building and volunteering, CSOs (civil society organisations) actively strengthen resilience, trust and the common good through active citizenship. They contribute through service provision, advocacy, by shaping evidence-informed measures and by exercising policy scrutiny. Their role reduces polarisation, promotes trust in institutions and supports democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights."

Below I outline some of the reflections I shared during the EESC discussion on 4th September.

Volunteering enables inclusive democratic participation

It is essential to recognise that volunteering plays a key role in enabling inclusive democratic participation. We in Volunteer Ireland strongly believe that volunteering is itself inherently an act of democracy and participation. Indeed, volunteers are the embodiment of the proactive exercise of European values and citizenship. Volunteering creates the trust, cooperation and civic responsibility that democracies rely on, connecting communities and supporting resilience, wellbeing and social cohesion.

Many civil society organisations rely on volunteers for their existence, and to increase their impact. Without volunteers, several civil society organisations would be greatly weakened. And democracy across Europe (and indeed the world) relies on civil society organisations.

Supporting marginalised communities to engage at community level

Notably, volunteering can be particularly effective at reaching disaffected, underserved or marginalised communities. To give an Irish example, Volunteer Ireland and the network of 29 local Volunteer Centres across the country that make up the essential volunteering infrastructure do a lot of work engaging 'new arrivals' to Ireland with volunteering.

For volunteers themselves, volunteering is a great way to practice and learn skills, and improve English if you don't already speak it. But it's also about building bridges. Volunteering allows a safe space where new arrivals and people who were born in Ireland work together to improve their shared communities, and in that process get to know each other. By breaking down barriers, volunteering creates richer, more integrated communities.

The same power of volunteering to build connection across groups applies to many excluded and marginalised people. Volunteer Centres in Ireland also play a key role in supporting all communities to volunteer. For example, they can provide additional personal support to people who are long term unemployed or disabled, or who face other barriers to inclusion.

Volunteers can also be a great way for civil society organisations to increase their diversity and thus reap the countless benefits of having a diverse organisation. In Volunteer Ireland's 2026 survey of volunteer involving organisations, 92% stated that "including volunteers contributes to diversity, equality and inclusion in our organisation".

This sentiment is also reflected in the knowledge and acceptance of diversity both within the organisation and personally for volunteers. The same survey showed that 87% of volunteer involving organisations felt that "volunteering contributes to the

understanding of different cultures within the community". A similar survey of volunteers in 2026 showed that 76% believed that volunteering helped them understand different cultures within their community.

Grassroots community and civil society organisations rely on volunteers

The social benefits of volunteering don't end there. Volunteering also supports and enables grassroots organisations who work on democratic participation. Grassroots organisations are often particularly reliant on volunteers to deliver their work, as many do not have any paid staff at all, often relying completely on volunteers to deliver community services, supports and drive campaigns. In Ireland, we know that:

- 76% of the civil society organisations we surveyed in 2026, stated that "without volunteers we would have to significantly reduce the number of our service users."
- In a similar survey of volunteers in 2026, 86% of respondents stated that volunteering had increased their sense of being part of or belonging to the community.

Supporting community resilience

Volunteering also enables, and is a critical support to, community level resilience. For example, Volunteer Ireland, the Volunteer Centres and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht have worked together in recent years to develop the Community Volunteers Programme. This is a national programme that recruits volunteers to be ready to act in response to urgent needs - such as flooding or a pandemic. These volunteers are recruited and trained across the country and stand ready to be deployed in case of emergency. They are kept engaged in between such crisis moments through volunteering at various community events and projects.

These volunteers complement existing voluntary services such as the Civil Defence and Red Cross, by providing additional support. We currently have about 6,800 Community Volunteers across the country, who are ready to be called upon - a strong resource to support resilience across Ireland.

Increasing skills and opening up participation opportunities

Volunteering also provides skills and leadership training, which are important building blocks to democracy and community participation. Volunteer Ireland's national surveys of volunteers have consistently found over the last 10 years that volunteers see huge value in their volunteering. For example:

- 47% felt their skills and employability increased
- 64% felt their motivation had increased
- 55% reported improved social and communication skills
- 51% reported increased confidence and self-esteem

Our surveys of volunteering involving organisations echo this. 70% of civil society organisations agreed that volunteering contributes to building skills, personal development and employability, in turn opening up new participation opportunities for the volunteer.

While this is true generally, it is also notably evident where volunteering supports marginalised communities. A current Volunteer Ireland project that engages International Protection applicants in volunteering has shown that for participants:

- 74% strongly agreed that "they learned new skills from volunteering (e.g. technical, organisational, teamworking, communication, practical and leadership skills)"
- 88% strongly agreed that volunteering helped them feel more ready to work in Ireland

Challenges to volunteering

There is no doubt about the positive impact of volunteering in fostering democratic participation. However, volunteering across Ireland and the EU faces several challenges.

Equality of access to volunteering is an ongoing issue. Irish statistics show lower levels of volunteering in some groups – for example, disabled people, those who are unemployed and some ethnic minority groups. As demonstrated earlier, inclusive and accessible volunteering makes for better experiences for volunteers, organisations and communities. To ensure everyone has access to the opportunity to volunteer, we need to adopt pro-active approaches to recruiting and retaining diverse volunteers, and to address structural barriers that may make volunteering difficult for certain groups.

There are also some worrying signs that rates of volunteering may be declining. Some organisations report increasing difficulty recruiting volunteers. There are also indications that the number of hours people volunteer is decreasing. Both suggest that the way that people are volunteering is changing.

To counter these challenges, and to protect the vital role that volunteering plays in supporting community connection, resilience, and democratic participation, investment in volunteering is necessary and prudent. Many people think that volunteering is just a lovely thing that happens, but it is not as simple as that – investment and support is required so that the volunteering experience is a positive one, that is meaningful, impactful and continued.

Recommendations

As I've outlined, volunteering is a key driver of inclusive democratic participation, civic engagement and social cohesion across Europe (and indeed the world). Therefore, investing in volunteering is essential to strengthen democracy and community resilience.

Some key recommendations that can help to strengthen volunteering, and thus strengthen civil society and democratic participation, include:

- Political recognition of the value and contribution of volunteers and volunteering is essential at every level
- Develop national and/or EU level volunteering strategies to ensure volunteering is supported, as we have in Ireland
- Develop and support a volunteering infrastructure. Ireland is also a leader in this, with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht supporting and investing in both a national volunteer development organisation and a network of local Volunteer Centres
- Strategies should include actions and resources to support:
    - Civil society organisations that involve volunteers – specifically to support their volunteer programmes
    - The essential national infrastructure that enables volunteering

Investing in volunteering is investing in democracy. Equally important is stronger political recognition of the contribution of volunteering to democratic participation, strengthening social and community ties and engagement, and supporting resilience. Ireland's emphasis on this issue is welcome, as is the EESC's opinion. We hope to see this work and perspective strengthened further at Irish and EU level in the year ahead, as one of the many legacies of IVY.

https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/inclusive-democratic-participation-promoting-civil-society-communities

Reflection 7

Volunteering, Civic Space and Resilience: Why Safeguarding Volunteers Matters by Dervla King, Comhlámh, November 2026.

As the UN-designated International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development (IVY 2026) draws to a close, the safeguarding of volunteers remains an issue that is increasingly pressing - for different reasons and in different ways - in various contexts around the globe. Comhlámh began the year by hosting the Irish launch of the "Call to Action for the Future of Volunteering[1]" at an event in Dublin on International Volunteer Day 2025. Drawing on research and conversations involving thousands of volunteers worldwide, the Call starts with a stark observation: volunteering today takes place against a backdrop of conflict, displacement, climate disruption, democratic strain and widening inequalities. While volunteers remain essential contributors to social cohesion, humanitarian action, sustainable development and community wellbeing, they are often "unrecognised, undervalued and under-resourced". Importantly, the Call argues that creating safe conditions for volunteering is no longer a peripheral concern, but a pre-requisite for volunteering itself.

The question, however, is what we mean by "safe". At the Global Volunteering Forum in Paris in October 2026[2], Jagan Chapagain, Secretary General of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), spoke about the increasingly dangerous conditions faced by volunteers serving in some of the world's most challenging contexts. From Palestine to South Sudan, recent years have seen historically high levels of violence, detention and intimidation directed towards humanitarian workers and volunteers.

Threats to volunteering are not confined to armed conflict. Across many European countries, volunteers are reporting forms of intimidation, harassment and hostility that can make participation more difficult, less safe, and take a greater personal toll. There are growing concerns about the contraction of civic space and the increasingly hostile environment faced by civil society actors working on global justice issues such as migration, human rights, equality and social inclusion. The CIVICUS Monitor (2025)[3] has highlighted how intimidation, disinformation, public vilification and restrictions on participation can raise the personal costs of civic engagement. These pressures are often experienced directly by volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations.

There is growing evidence that this trend is being felt by migrant solidarity responders across the island of Ireland and the United Kingdom. Some examples were highlighted by volunteers supporting international protection applicants in Ireland, responding to a survey conducted by the Irish Refugee Council. They reported harassment, stalking, threats, abuse and violence associated with anti-migrant mobilisation[4]. In the North of Ireland, migrant-support organisations have documented intimidation campaigns, online harassment and threats directed at staff, volunteers and activists[5], according to a 2026 Human Rights First report on intimidation of migrant-support organisations. Similar patterns are present in the UK, where volunteers with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) have faced online abuse, physical intimidation, protests and misinformation because of their role in rescuing migrants in the English Channel. In recent months, the RNLI has increased security measures and has worked with police to protect volunteers and facilities after reports of online and physical abuse[6].

These examples reflect wider European concerns. The PICUM network has documented

1 Call-to-Action-for-the-Future-of-Volunteering-DEC-2025.pdf
2 Theme - IVCO 2026
3 Global Findings 2025 - Civicus Monitor
4 'I've worked in conflict zones. but I've never felt as unsafe as I did during the summer in Ireland' and Call for State to address homeless asylum seekers' needs
5 "Locals Only": Migrants and Their Supporters Targeted in Northern Ireland and Groups supporting migrants in Northern Ireland face harassment and intimidation - Investigations & Analysis - Northern Ireland from The Detail
6 Police working to protect RNLI in Dorset amid opposition to small boat rescues | Immigration and asylum | The Guardian and RNLI steps up security after abuse by far-right agitators over small boat rescues | Immigration and asylum | The Guardian

the continuing criminalisation, harassment and public hostility faced by individuals and organisations acting in solidarity with migrants and refugees[7]. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights has pointed to the increasingly challenging operating environment for organisations working on migration and fundamental rights issues[8]. Such developments suggest that a shrinking civic space is not only an outcome of formal legal restrictions on organisations, but that it might also be related to whether people feel able to participate safely, openly and freely in public life.

Although these contexts differ, they reveal a common pattern: volunteering itself can become contested. When this happens, volunteers may face risks that extend beyond the activities they originally signed up to undertake. This is where the IVY 2026 agenda offers an important reframing. The Call to Action argues that safeguarding volunteering should not be understood solely in terms of physical safety. Volunteers must also be able to organise, participate and advocate without fear of intimidation, exploitation, harassment or retaliation. In this sense, safeguarding volunteering and safeguarding civic space are deeply interconnected. The implications extend well beyond the volunteering sector.

Research on volunteering consistently highlights its contribution to social trust, participation, inclusion and community resilience. Volunteering helps create the relationships, networks and habits of cooperation that enable communities to respond collectively to challenges. When volunteering becomes associated with hostility, intimidation or personal risk, participation can carry significant social and emotional costs. This may discourage existing volunteers, deter potential new volunteers and weaken the networks that communities rely upon during times of crisis.

The overall effect has important implications for resilience and preparedness. The European Commission's Preparedness Union Strategy adopts a whole-of-society approach that explicitly recognises citizens, communities, civil society organisations and volunteer action as essential components of crisis preparedness and response[9]. Resilience depends not only on public institutions but also on trusted local relationships, active citizenship and community mobilisation. If shrinking civic space reduces people's willingness to volunteer, the consequences may extend far beyond any single policy area. The same climate of hostility that discourages someone from volunteering with refugees today may discourage them from volunteering during floods, storms, public health emergencies, energy disruptions or climate-related disasters tomorrow. Over time, this can erode the local networks, trust, knowledge and the surge capacity that preparedness planning increasingly assumes will be available.

The emerging European preparedness agenda draws on the idea that resilient societies depend upon people being willing and able to act together. Volunteering is one of the principal ways through which communities organise, respond and express solidarity. Protecting volunteers is therefore not only a volunteering issue. It is a civic space issue, a democratic participation issue and a resilience issue. Building on the IVY 2026 Call to Action, policymakers should invest in volunteer infrastructure, strengthen volunteer wellbeing and safety measures, and counter misinformation and hostility directed at civic participation. Volunteering is a core component of preparedness and resilience planning, while at the same time, volunteers are much more than service providers. They represent the social infrastructure that enables communities to respond, adapt and care for one another. Therefore, safeguarding volunteers means safeguarding the civic space, trust and solidarity upon which resilient societies depend. The third point of the Call to Action, as presented in Dublin on IVD one year ago, remains one to which we must be attendant.

7 Cases-of-criminalisation-of-migration-and-solidarity-in-the-EU-in-2023.pdf
8 Fundamental Rights Report 2025
9 Preparedness Union Strategy: reinforcing Europe's resilience in a changing world | EEAS

Call to Action on the Future of Volunteering, Area 3 - Safeguarding

It is now more urgent than ever to create safe environments where volunteering can thrive. The safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity of all volunteers, and the people with whom they engage with, across all contexts, are paramount to ensure that they contribute without fear of harm or exploitation.

https://forum-ids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Call-to-Action-for-the-Future-of-Volunteering-DEC-2025.pdf


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