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The Global Research Agenda on Volunteering for Peace and Development

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In 2015, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development (hereafter Agenda 2030).¹ Intended to end poverty by fostering socially and environmentally sustainable development, this ambitious agenda specifies 17 Sustainable Development Goals and a vision for accomplishing them. Volunteering is recognized as a key means of meeting these goals, but demand remains high for empirical evidence on the value of and challenges associated with volunteering.² Prompted by this demand, the General Assembly encouraged researchers to take stock of existing data, identify best practices, locate weaknesses in evidence, and chart gaps in global knowledge on volunteering.³

As Agenda 2030 took shape and volunteering's intended role became clear, three organizational partners began collaborating to create a global research agenda (GRA): The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, the International Forum on Volunteering for Development, and the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis have focused on a schema for research to clarify volunteering's possible roles in advancing peace and fostering development.

In July 2015, the three partners brought together a transdisciplinary group of leading researchers and practitioners in the areas of volunteering, peace, and development. During this brainstorming workshop in Bonn, Germany, participants identified focal areas, themes, and components of the GRA. This initial convening, together with related conversations held the same year in Nairobi, Kenya, and

Washington, DC, produced a common intellectual ground and a shared vision for volunteering in development.

In summarizing these conversations, Seelig and Lough reported the working vision statement created by the gathering in Bonn: The vision for the GRA is to “develop a rigorous body of global multidisciplinary knowledge to better understand and inform the practice and contributions of volunteering to sustainable development.”⁴ The gathering recognized that governments and voluntary organizations could use the resulting knowledge to support environments enabling volunteering for development and that the knowledge base could inform future research.

Because Agenda 2030 and the demand for evidence are global in scope, the required research collaborations must extend across common divides to achieve a similar scope: knowledge exchange that includes all world regions, with researchers working at national and international levels, as well as in high-, middle-, and low-income countries. Such efforts are needed to convey the message that the goals of Agenda 2030 cannot be achieved without

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the everyday contributions of volunteers to policy, practice, and governance.⁵

The GRA provides a framework through which stakeholders can work together to leverage the full potential of volunteering. That framework enables effective assessments of the benefits and drawbacks of volunteering for sustainable peace and development.

Objectives of the GRA

The GRA identifies five priorities:

1. Useful theoretical frameworks to understand and explain the relationships between volunteering and development
2. Locally informed methods, tools, and processes to understand the scale and scope of volunteering, as well as its contributions to the global Sustainable Development Goals
3. Conditions for an enabling environment in which volunteering for development can thrive at all levels
4. A focus on new trends in volunteering for development and on current contextual factors such as dynamics specific to volunteering in the Global South, in community-based settings, with populations experiencing forced migration, and on projects for environmental sustainability
5. An inclusive process for implementing and evolving the GRA on volunteering for development—a process consistent with the values of participation and partnership

Each of these five priorities continues to develop as opportunities have arisen to explore the issues in related arenas. The succeeding outline notes key areas of progress made since 2015.

Progress Made Toward the Objectives Since 2015

1. Useful theoretical frameworks to understand and explain the relationships between volunteering and development

In prioritizing the development of theory, the GRA recognizes that conceptualization is needed to explain the complementary contributions of volunteers and to more precisely define constructions of volunteering in different contexts. Volunteers have a distinctive value in development efforts.

Governments produce public goods that citizens cannot; likewise, citizens produce collective goods—through community-based action and self-organized voluntary action—that governments cannot. Better theory is required to understand which actors are best suited for which tasks in this coproductive space. As Seelig and Lough put it, there is a need to conceptualize “how volunteering can contribute to development beyond supplying cheap labor in development projects.”⁶ Voluntary action and mutual aid often enable survival in low-income and vulnerable communities. In such contexts, volunteering is not merely “a nice thing to do.” To survive, people need to help each other through mutual aid, informal volunteering, and similar engagements. The contribution of theory on volunteering—as service is expressed in citizen participation, activism, and advocacy—is often overlooked in conceptual and theoretical approaches to peace and development processes.

Since 2015, progress toward this objective has been made on two fronts. First, multiple panels on the theory of volunteering for development were organized and presented at the 2016 and 2018 biennial conferences of the International Society for Third Sector Research.⁷ Scholarly work on these topics continues. Second, *The Thread That Binds: Volunteerism and Community Resilience*, the 2018 State of the World’s Volunteerism Report published by UNV, focused on theorizing and measuring the “distinctive contributions” of volunteering to development, specifically the contributions to community resilience.⁸

2. Locally informed methods, tools, and processes to understand the scale and scope of volunteering, as well as its contribution to the global Sustainable Development Goals

The GRA recognizes the need for basic descriptive and comparable information on the numbers and types of volunteers in different settings. In turn, there is a need for innovative research methodologies that consider the local context, especially in the Global South. Those methodologies should include qualitative and quantitative approaches to generate a mix of research that is locally grounded and validated. There is also a need to improve understanding of volunteering’s distinctive contributions across different sectors, particularly its contributions to development impacts and outcomes. Research should endeavor to integrate the literatures and methods on the role of volunteering in citizen science, monitoring, and evaluation. For example,

involving local volunteers as citizen researchers would likely generate different data than those resulting from researchers from the Global North.⁹

Since 2015, progress has been made in several areas. The UN Plan of Action, shaped in 2015, focuses on local and national capacity to measure volunteer contributions.¹⁰ The International Labour Organization's *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work* has adopted volunteering as a form of work.¹¹ This implies that volunteering will soon be measured at the same level, and with similar attention, as other forms of work.¹²

Moreover, a significant amount of information has been shared since 2015. The 2016 and 2018 conferences of the International Society for Third Sector Research featured several panels on measuring and empirically documenting volunteering for development. Numerous publications have ensued.¹³

One of the key products from these efforts is a background paper on global rates of volunteering.¹⁴ That work provided updated estimates and emphasized measurement of direct (i.e., informal) volunteering. A second product is a UNV policy paper that emphasizes the importance and considers the possibilities of using volunteers as citizen scientists to collect data for environmental mapping and monitoring on climate change.¹⁵ A forthcoming thematic paper examines the potential effects of involving volunteers in research design and data collection. It emphasizes that such involvement can be a basis for individual, collective, and institutional action.¹⁶

3. Conditions for an enabling environment in which volunteering for development can thrive at all levels

The GRA recognizes the need for studies on a variety of contextual elements that allow volunteering to thrive (e.g., political, educational, cultural, social, economic, legal factors). Research has developed some of these elements, but others remain largely overlooked. Credible and comparable data are needed for effective advocacy to strengthen country-level volunteering infrastructures.

Research on the environmental conditions that enable effective volunteering must be motivated by policy and practice needs if it is to inform legislation and institutional designs. Moreover, a plan is required to facilitate the integration of findings into policy.

Since 2015, several contributions have focused on the issue of enabling environment. In 2018, a paper

commissioned and published by UNV showcased the continued expansion and innovation of volunteering infrastructure, along with the challenges, tensions, and contradictions inherent in establishing that infrastructure globally.¹⁷ The UN Plan of Action was also designed to address volunteer infrastructure and an enabling environment.¹⁸ Additional presentations and papers have focused on volunteering for development in specific countries, advancing knowledge of volunteer infrastructure at the country level.¹⁹

4. A focus on new trends in volunteering for development and on current contextual factors

The GRA seeks to ensure that research will cover a broad range of the types of volunteering. Several areas of inquiry are appropriate. Little research has examined the darker side of volunteering, whereby volunteers are misused for inappropriate religious or political purposes. Informal volunteering and community-based volunteering both require additional investigation. Research should also move beyond the narrow conceptualization of volunteering as “service delivery.” One way it can do so is by focusing on volunteers’ roles in advocacy and activism. Corporate and e-volunteering (online, mobile, and other, technologically enabled engagements) are emerging targets for investigation.

In particular, there is a need to focus on relevance for policy. Several aspects of volunteering lend themselves to policy development: volunteering for youth employment, volunteering infrastructure, the social and physical protection of volunteers, new urban realities affecting volunteering, volunteering in fragile and postconflict environments, inequities around gender and volunteering, the social and physical protection of volunteers, the role of volunteering in contexts of forced migration, and volunteering to address climate change through practical action and advocacy for policy change.

The GRA recognizes the roles of new technologies, especially mobile platforms that enhance and extend volunteering. The research on technology’s potential roles must be prioritized if volunteering is going to be represented in these discussions.

Since 2015, a diverse group of scholars and practitioner-researchers have published new work on volunteering for environmental sustainability,²⁰ volunteering and gender,²¹ youth,²² violence prevention,²³ and disasters/humanitarian relief.²⁴ A 2018 special issue of *Voluntaris: Journal of Volunteer Services*, simultaneously published in book form by Nomos, focused

on the challenges and contributions of international volunteering for development. The issue included the works of scholars from nine countries in the Global South.²⁵ In addition, 15 unpublished community reports served as background for the 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report.²⁶ The reports delve into volunteering activity intended to foster community resilience in diverse country-specific settings.

5. An inclusive process for implementing and evolving the GRA on volunteering for development—a process consistent with the values of participation and partnership

The GRA identifies the need for greater collaboration and coordination between different stakeholders, including universities, nongovernmental organizations, United Nations member states, and local communities. While some good partnerships are evolving between practitioners and academics who study volunteering, these require support if the engagement and collaboration are to endure. As the GRA is implemented and evolves, input from diverse stakeholders is vital. Research institutions, volunteer networks, governmental agencies, media, funders, and local populations all have important insights that should be considered. But lack of funding is a significant issue. Funding for a lead coordinator to move this agenda forward would be particularly beneficial.

There is little expertise or capacity for local research on volunteering for development. A capacity building component would therefore contribute to an inclusive process. One way to build capacity would be to take better advantage of collective online spaces (e.g., webinars, online forums). Translation requirements are another consideration; translation would facilitate the global spread of knowledge on volunteering for development and volunteering infrastructure.

For the GRA to accomplish the specified objectives, there is a need to ensure that leadership is globally representative, particularly representative of Southern voices and perspectives.

Since 2015, multiple scholars working to advance the GRA have organized regular meetings, panels, and other collaborations at the annual conferences of the international volunteer cooperation organizations, the International Association for Volunteer Effort, and the International Society for Third Sector Research. The Center for Social Development led the organization of a roundtable and sponsored a dinner at the 2018 International Society for Third Sector Research conference to review progress on the GRA and to forge new research partnerships and collaborations.

Rebecca Tiessen received a 2015 Partnership Development Grant and a 2018 Collaboration Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.²⁷ She has leveraged these awards to bring together scholars and practitioners for the purposes of strengthening academic–practice partnerships and advancing research on volunteering for development.

Looking to the Future: 2018–2020

As noted above, the 2018 conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research provided a venue to reconvene many of the scholars and practitioners working to advance the GRA. The gathering was not as inclusive as needed because the cost of the conference was high, but the forum allowed many to discuss progress made over the past 3 years and to consider future steps. The discussions focused on the first three of the GRA's main priorities: theory, measurement, and current themes and contexts.

Theory

There is general consensus concerning the phenomena, differences, and subjects that should be addressed in the theoretical model to be produced through the GRA. In part, the consensus reflected the common agenda. The field ultimately needs breadth and depth in research and theory; narrow and disparate studies do not speak to larger unified research questions.

Given this concern, it may be productive for the GRA to consider different theoretical frameworks for different approaches. What specific volunteer models require theoretical explanation (e.g., formal and informal forms of volunteering; local, national, international volunteering)? There are many trajectories for volunteering, with differences in programs and concepts. As yet, there is no consensus on several issues related to terminology, including how it is used in different contexts and how language is conflated. Because of these ongoing challenges, it may be necessary to tailor theoretical frames and explanations to particular approaches.

The lack of depth in the evidence on volunteering for development makes it difficult to have a strong conceptual debate based on empirical differences. Several studies impose an incompatible theoretical frame on empirical data for predetermined purposes. An alternative is to start in an inductive way: to value and use stories and/or more robust data of volunteers to build up good theory.

Theorizing on volunteer activity related to peace and development is complicated by variation in

demands and priorities across sectors and contexts. In addition, agendas are often driven by institutions and funders, whose priorities can impede certain kinds of collaborations with practitioners if critical analysis is not a focus and there is aversion to failure or critique of programs. In other words, research done in collaboration with volunteer organizations is often demand driven, arising from the needs of a donor or the organization. Those entities tend to be more interested in outcomes than in advancing theory. Independent funding may enable theoretical advances as well as freedom from the priorities of volunteer organizations and their donors.

Researchers who study volunteering for peace and development come from diverse fields. Thus, knowledge sharing can be weak and top-ranked journals and publications differ across disciplines. In addition, research on volunteering for development is often siloed from other volunteering research, where theoretical articles are more abundant. Scholars may begin to overcome this challenge by prioritizing submissions to widely read journals that publish work on volunteering.

Measurement

Empowering and supporting local groups to collect data about local development remain challenging. National-level processes exist in some countries to support formal volunteerism, but volunteering that positively impacts peace and development is often informal, community based, and not clearly visible in formal settings. Researchers need better ways to capture these local contributions, which are fundamental to progress on Agenda 2030's Sustainable Development Goals.

One benefit of collaboration among researchers, volunteer-sending organizations, and local groups is the possibility for a meta-analysis with existing measures and studies. With grant funding, researchers could also complete a variety of related studies concentrated on a single question or a small set of questions. Without funding, this would be possible but more difficult. Academics with lower levels of risk (i.e., tenured faculty) can help by organizing and implementing collaborative research with nongovernmental organizations and funders.

Measurement in the field of volunteering for development can also benefit from citizen participation; as "citizen scientists," volunteers often collect and map data but are less commonly involved in collaborations to design interventions. As yet, researchers

do not have a good understanding of how to do such collaborations well and lack the necessary tools. Volunteers frequently act as amateur researchers, possessing rich understanding of local contexts and nuances. The research community should invest the effort required to recognize and value what volunteers have to offer.

Moreover, measurement in this field requires better linkages to theory. What are researchers measuring and why? Should they focus on measuring volunteers' contributions to progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, or should they focus on the value that volunteers add as development actors in a system with other complementary actors? What is the "unique selling proposition" or "competitive advantage" of volunteers? Moreover, how can research attribute significant change to specific volunteer interventions, and what institutional factors influence volunteering outcomes? These are theoretical questions that require better articulation before researchers can make solid progress on measurement.

Considering the diversity of academic/practitioner collaborations in this field, is it practical to measure different things for different actors? This is already happening at some level, as volunteer-involving organizations complete evaluations that speak to their stakeholders. How can researchers push volunteer-sending organizations to use evaluation measures, thereby investing in and contributing to the wider knowledge base?

In research with volunteer-involving organizations, there is a pressure to study impact. Impact should be measured over the long term, but time-bound challenges and short-term measurement are the norm. These issues are compounded by high staff turnover and by internal staff changes that impede information sharing. The coordination of research takes time and requires effort to build relationships; the effort is inhibited if the relationships end before they bear fruit. Funding may give organizations and staff incentives to invest in longer term research.

Themes and Context

Several different areas for progress can be targeted in the next period:

- » Issues of accountability emerged in research on relationships between international organizations and local communities, and on the relationships between international volunteer cooperation organizations and partner organizations in a postcolonial era.

- » Several issues have not been addressed, and some of the gaps in knowledge are linked to differences in stakeholders' use of terminology.
- » Diverse forms of volunteering, such as faith-based volunteering in the development context, tend to receive little attention but are highly prevalent.
- » Processes and outcomes of managing volunteer relationships—including the power relationships within transnational knowledge sharing; active relationships, notably the engagement of transnational volunteers upon their return to a home country; and the role of volunteering in community building—all deserve greater attention.
- » Big data, profiling the levels of volunteer activity, and the location and types of volunteer contribution all remain areas of opportunity for research.
- » State and civil society relationships have been researched in related areas, such as in nonprofit and third-sector studies, but have received less attention in volunteering scholarship. There is a need for an examination of the ways in which these relationships influence volunteering for development.
- » Volunteer infrastructure—notably, state policies and models of volunteering—has received greater attention in recent years, but much remains to be done in order to influence policy outcomes and to create an enabling environment for volunteering.

Continuing to engage with these challenges in a focused, collaborative way, and engaging with future opportunities, will greatly help to advance the theoretical and empirical base informing volunteering as a critical, people-centered development strategy for Agenda 2030.

Notes

Portions of this brief have been adapted from Seelig and Lough (2015).

- ¹ G.A. Res. 70/1, Transforming the World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sept. 25, 2015), <http://undocs.org/A/RES/70/1>.
- ² Seelig and Lough (2015).
- ³ G.A. Res. 70/129, Integrating Volunteering Into Peace and Development: The Plan of Action for the Next Decade and Beyond (Dec. 17, 2015), <http://undocs.org/A/RES/70/129>.

- ⁴ Seelig and Lough (2015, p. 6).
- ⁵ Devereux, Paull, Hawkes, and Georgeou (2017).
- ⁶ Seelig and Lough (2015, p. 7).
- ⁷ Baillie Smith and Hazeldine (2016); Baillie Smith, Thomas, and Cadesky (2018); Georgeou (2016); Lough and Tiessen (2016); Mati (2016); Thérèse, Clark, and Baillie Smith (2018).
- ⁸ Lough (2018, p. 4).
- ⁹ Cohn (2008).
- ¹⁰ G. A. Res. 70/129, *supra* note 3. For a summary of the plan, see United Nations Volunteers programme (2018).
- ¹¹ International Labour Office (2011).
- ¹² De Medina (2017).
- ¹³ Allum (2017); Allum, Davis Smith, and Salway (2018); Devereux et al. (2018); Fonović, Guidi, and Cappadozzi (2016); Haddock and Devereux (2016); Onuki (2018); and Russell (2016).
- ¹⁴ Salamon, Sokolowski, and Haddock (2018).
- ¹⁵ United Nations Volunteers programme (2017a).
- ¹⁶ For an early draft, see Devereux et al. (2018).
- ¹⁷ Grandi, Lough, and Bannister (2018).
- ¹⁸ United Nations General Assembly (2015).
- ¹⁹ See, e.g., Beswick and Hjort (2018) and Mati (2018).
- ²⁰ Devereux et al. (2018).
- ²¹ Manchego (in press); Tiessen and Delaney (2018).
- ²² Mati (2018); Rath (2018); and Tindi, Lembrez, Kan, and Masaad (in press).
- ²³ United Nations Volunteers programme (2017b).
- ²⁴ Lough (2018).
- ²⁵ Tiessen, Lough, and Grantham (2018).
- ²⁶ See, e.g., Gausi and Tindi (2017); Manchego (2017).
- ²⁷ For the 2015 award, see Effective Practices for International Volunteering, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Grant 890-2014-0051; for the 2018 award, see Enhancing Scholar/Practitioner Research Collaboration to Better Understand International Volunteering for Development, Grant 850-2018-0154.

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